



The Forest Tells a Story

***An Original Short Story by:
Cherie Dimaline***



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“The spelling of the words spoken by community members is intentionally different to reflect the unique language used by the characters representing members of the Georgian Bay Historic Community. The author’s choice to represent this in writing highlights how the language differs from standard French, both in sound and structure. By using this representation, the author aims to preserve the authenticity of the community’s linguistic heritage, showing the richness of their identity and culture. This choice reflects the author’s intent to portray the characters’ experiences and traditions in a way that is deeply rooted in their cultural landscape, ensuring that their identity remains visible and preserved.”



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There were six of them in total, and if you lined them up, not a single one would break 5' 5". What they lacked in height, Edna's kids more than made up for in volume. They laughed the loudest, sang the clearest, told stories in a big voice and with all the sound effects. Joanie was the youngest by far. There was nearly two decades between her and her closest sibling, an older sister named after a wild auntie who could dance until the dirt was dust at her knees. Of all six, Joanie was the quietest. Sometimes they called her 'p'tit souris' - little mouse. But mostly, they didn't call her at all. She was too young to go on adventures, too small to be of use on a hunt. She didn't mind; this gave her plenty of time to dream and more than enough opportunity to observe.

Their halfbreed community was a bustle of movement and song. They carried this word – halfbreed- sometimes meant as a cutting insult from outsiders, but it didn't feel right. They were not half of anything anymore. Generations of mixed blood and cohesive culture had made them their own people. Both Joanie's parents came from these long and tangled lines. They were isolated by habit and geography so that everyone around her was from this same lineage. Being the same, there was no occasion to talk about it – the particulars of their community – they were too busy just living it. Other names were used over the years – Métis, Wiisaakodewinini, Black French. The one that stuck, the one that seemed simple and filling enough was tied to the land – they were Across the Bay people.

By 1965, the population of their community stopped growing at the rate it had been. So many moved on for school and jobs, taking the language and stories out into the wider world. Still, the old families' roots were strong, and there was always something happening. You could usually figure out the particulars of those events by the season. Spring and fall – hunting and bush harvesting. Winter – ice fishing and soirees for the holidays. Summer – all manner of mischief. But in every season, there was the medicine.



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Medicine was largely the job of old ladies, a kind of doctoring society whose work was carried out in whispers and with steady hands. There were no written rules, no certificates or degrees – just a willingness to go into the birch trees for ingredients and the patience to stand over a hot stove to bind them together. Sometimes, they went into the church to borrow holy water, a connection to the French ancestors that stitched through their Indigenous lines.

Joanie was ten when she was pulled into this society of healers, most likely on account of her quiet nature and the fact that her mother Edna was getting tired as the years went on. She was already a grandmother by then, a Mère to a growing brood from the older siblings.

“Come on, then,” her mother would say, picking up a loose woven basket and handing Joanie a cloth bag made up of linen scraps from outgrown clothes. “And make sure you wear socks there, for the ticks.”

They would spend hours on these trips. Her mother would tell her all about the wide world that ended on one side with the deep Georgian Bay and on the other side in the farmer’s fields French settlers tended. Only one side really truly welcomed their community – the Bay. They pushed their small crafts out into the tumultuous, dark waters with a kind of familiar ease, while avoiding walking the roads in the other direction. Even when the waters rolled heavy as winter approached, it was safer than going into the town that had sprung up across the Bay, but one could never be certain enough to walk without speed and even then, in pairs.

“Mushrooms? They’re the hardest, them. They disguise themselves, especially the ones with poison. You have to check twice then ask.”

“Ask who?”



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Out here, when it was just her and her mother, Joanie had a voice.

“Me, for sure,” her mother smiled. “But if not, well then, ask yourself, or one of the women. Or the Jesus. Just be sure, there.”

It was hard to keep all the descriptions and uses straight in her head – which weed to chew for stomach aches, which sumac bloom was deadly and which made an eye infection go away. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to learn – she loved the way her mother’s face creased up around her eyes when she gave her a correct answer. It was just that the forest was full of something else too – stories. Joanie heard them whispering around the branches like spiders spinning webs. It was easy to get caught up in those silky, sticky strings.

“Pay attention, you.” It was a familiar refrain. Her mother caught her eyes wandering or her step slowing and she knew the trees had grabbed her girl’s attention. But this work was important and there were too few people willing to learn it. She had to make sure it stuck. A community is more than land and people – it was also medicine and mourning, song and belief. You never knew when one

might wear too thin so Edna tried to hand down everything she could, even when it seemed like the girl couldn’t carry so much.

“You don’t want to have no idea what’s what when you’re needed. Mon Dieu, what would you do then, eh?”

Joanie tried; really, she did. She tried to focus in on the words her mother said, the plants and bark she pointed out instead of the whimsy and adventure that crawled along the moss and hid under each rock. Stories could come from anywhere, and when they did, Joanie couldn’t help but hear them. They erupted from anthills and settled in the curve of a bloom all around.



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Last year, at the beginning of Fall, one of their walks was interrupted by a story dropped into the woods. She had been trying to keep up with her mother's pace. Edna was a small woman, and her steps were not large, but when she was focused on a goal, she moved smooth and unbroken.

"Wait up," Joanie had called. "There's too many weeds out here."

"No such thing as weeds in here," her mother called back over her shoulder. "Not the way you mean it, you. Nothing that shouldn't be here is here."

Joanie sighed. Always a lesson. "Maybe it's me then. Maybe I'm the unwanted thing here."

That had caused her mother to pause, which Joanie took advantage of, putting her hands on her knobbly knees and catching her breath.

"That's true only if you're in here to undo or tear up. S'why we harvest with bags and baskets the seeds can fall out of – so we're planting as we pull," Edna said. "Now come on, there. It rained good last night – best chance to find a puffball."

They were hunting for the giant, creamy mushrooms that ballooned up like foam bubbles on the water's edge. They were elusive, which always felt like a feat of magic to the young girl since it seemed impossible that they could hide with their size and colouring.

"We've been out here for hours already," she whined. "I don't think there's any."



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But Edna was already gone, tromping ahead on light feet. Joanie straightened up and took a few deep breaths before following, wiping sweat off the back of her neck.

There was a small rustling to her left. She turned in time to see a sleek, black squirrel crawl out from the underbrush and stand on its hind legs.

“Oh, hello,” Joanie whispered.

The squirrel turned its head on an angle, sizing her up with one round, shiny eye. It hopped closer, then stood straight once more.

“Who are you?” Joanie bent and slowly extended a hand, but it jumped away, scampering across her path.

“Where are you going?”

Instead of fleeing at her voice, it paused, looked over a rounded shoulder and crept ahead. She decided to follow.

The squirrel took her off the path they had been trekking, around a blueberry bush picked clean by a sleepy bear. It would sniff here and there, zigzagging but moving steadily ahead. Every now and then, it would go back to its curious standing pose.

Joanie watched it carefully and saw its nose twitch. “Oh, you’re sniffing the air.”

When it moved, she followed, chatting amicably. “Mon Oncle Narcisse hunts with dogs. They use their nose like that. Is that what you’re doing, hunting? Wait, does a squirrel even eat meat?”



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It flicked its bushy tail and bounced off the bark of a creamy birch, sharp nails leaving small scratches like a warning.

“Yeah, maybe hunt is the wrong word. I think you’re just finding like me and my mom do.” She remembered the word they used at the community meeting. “Harvesting.”

The pair of them kept on like this, stopping to sniff, looking furtively at every noise and movement until they came to a clearing made by the criss-cross decay of felled trees.

“Lightning, I think,” Joanie remarked, examining the scorched wood while her furry companion, keeping a safe distance, hopped over the bare branches.

She remembered two things at once: that fallen trees were important as garden nurseries for new life, and that she had wandered away from her mother – who would definitely not be happy with her.

“I have to go,” she explained to the squirrel as he darted along the brittle trunk, soaked with rain water and blooming with bright moss. “I’m gonna be in trouble.”

The squirrel stood, sniffed, then dove off the other side.

“Hey, aren’t you gonna say goodbye?”

She stepped around the roiled roots upended above ground and that’s when she found her squirrel, and he, in turn, had found the biggest puffball she’d ever laid eyes on.



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Her mother laughed. “Woah, there. One thing at a time, now. When you are trying to do something as important as healing, you take it one thing at a time.”

There were things you could learn about what was to come from paying attention. When the trees were full of fruit, you could be sure a bad winter was coming. It was nature’s way of providing for the creatures to make it through the cold season. When rainbows started to appear after the rain, warmer weather was on the way.

But nothing could have prepared Joanie for the morning she woke up without her mother.

Joanie opened her eyes in the bed she shared with her mother to the sun filtering through the thin curtains and falling in geometric patterns across the clean sheets. It was a treat to sleep this late. Now that school had just let out for summer she didn’t have to wake up in the dark and start the long journey to school where the nuns would make her stand at the front of the classroom so the other children could tease her for her ‘Pig Latin French’. Until she went to that school, Joanie thought that she and her family spoke proper French. Until she went to that school, she had no idea their words were something to be made fun of. How could anything that her two old Méres’ spoke be anything but poetry?

She yawned, swung her feet to the hardwood floor and let the sun warm her face. Then she stood, stretched out her arms and teetered into the kitchen.

The kitchen was the main room of their small house. Really, the kitchen in every house was the main room – from her Uncle’s shack to her oldest sister’s farmhouse where she lived with her husband and their five kids. It’s where there was food and warmth and enough room for the fiddles and guitars that would play



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the music that set feet tapping. A kitchen floor was the perfect place to dance. So it was a shock when she went into her own cozy kitchen and found it empty, even this early in the day.

She shivered despite the summer heat.

“Maman?”

There was no point in shouting for her father. He was a fisherman on his good days, so even if he had made it home, he would be gone by now, out on the water. Sometimes he didn’t make it home, preferring to keep late hours on the main street where the lumberjacks and the tourists who liked to pretend they were hunters gathered for revelry. In either case, she did not call his name.

She couldn’t be alone, could she? She had far too many siblings and cousins and distant relations that came and went like good natured cats to be alone. She couldn’t remember the last time her voice was the only one in this house. The silence was heavy. It felt like a blanket pulled too tight, and she swung her arms at her sides to prove that she could still move.

Her mother had been up late coughing. That had been going on for several nights now. When she would lay her head on her mother’s chest, her breath sounded like pebbles clacking against each other. Last night it got bad and Edna had moved into the front room. Joanie had a vague recollection of her climbing over her. Her skin had been hot to the touch – too hot. Over the week, whenever Joanie asked after her, her mother would insist it wasn’t anything to be worried about. But then, she often ignored her own needs when there were so many others to attend to.



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Just then, there were footsteps on the front porch, and the screen door banged open with a squeak. Her sister Flo stood there, the sun at her back so that she looked like she was glowing. Even with the shadows across her face, Joanie could see the worry in her sister's eyes.

"Joanie, come on. Get dressed. We gotta go."

"Where's mom?" She felt something in her guts now like hunger reversed – an absence that wanted nothing but free reign. It made the back of her knees tingle. She felt every hair in her head by the root that connected into her skin. It was the beginning of the anxiety that grabbed her when she walked into the classroom; when she rushed down the streets in town on an errand; when the dark began to swallow the dirt roads and every Rougarou story she'd ever been told came rushing back at once.

"She's in the hospital. Percy is waiting out front in the car. Get dressed."

Joanie ran into the bedroom to do what she was told before the anxiety turned to panic, and she was unable to move ever again.

The drive there was a blur of wooden houses and dust from the road and finally houses stuck all close together as they made their way across the Bay. She listened to her cousin and her sister talk. Early that morning Edna had been walking back from the well with her jugs of water when she'd collapsed on the road. Some of the new cottagers who'd begun buying up the land around the Bay found her. They'd loaded her into their shiny convertible and brought her to the hospital in town. She had a high fever and was in and out of consciousness. They thought it was pneumonia.



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That word – pneumonia- struck Joanie in a way few others did – words like the bloodthirsty Rougarou, or like the words the Priest used to describe Hell on Sundays. The fear came from experience; she had pneumonia when she was little. It was her first memory. She could recall with perfect clarity the moment she understood that she would have to fight to breathe, measuring out each breath by the push and pull of muscles and will. Her body had stopped doing it without thought. The night it got the worst was when her mother and her Mère had covered her in a mustard plaster and stuffed her socks with wild onions. Then her aunties sang her the songs that kept the timing she'd need to do the work of breathing.

The hospital smelled wrong. It was chemical clean and deep rot.

“Nothing can get better here.” She whispered it to herself and it came out as a worried mumble. Flo squeezed her hand a little harder as she led her down the hall.

“It’s alright, Joanie. The doctors will take care of her.” But the reassurance Flo hoped to provide didn’t reach her voice. All it did was outline their collective fear big and bright like the sun at your back.

Their mother seemed impossible tiny on the hospital bed. She was dark against the white sheets, sweating into the flat pillow. Percy stayed by the door as Flo cried over her mother’s hand, calling for her to wake up over and over. They waited an hour before a doctor poked his head in.

“From across the Bay, then?” He raised an eyebrow at Percy’s narrowed eyes, then cleared his throat and spoke slow and clumsy. “Parlez vous Anglais?”

“Your medicine better be better than your French, Doc,” Percy responded.



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“Well, it’s what we figured – Edna has pneumonia. She’s dehydrated and having trouble breathing. We just have to hope the fever breaks.”

“Or what?” Flo could barely ask.

The doctor clicked his silver pen to retract the tip before shoving it in the breast pocket of his white coat and grimaced. “Let’s just take this one thing at a time.”

Then he turned on a shiny shoe and left them alone in the room.

Joanie couldn’t move. One thing at a time. She watched her sister cry, the way Percy fumbled to comfort her, resting a hand, calloused from hauling fishing nets, on her shoulder. She saw her mother wince in her sleep. And then she knew what she had to do.

“Percy, I need you to drive me home.”

She was out of the car and running up the front steps before Percy had a chance to cut the engine. Her mother’s basket was by the front door. She grabbed it and turned to rush back out. Her hand on the door, she sighed, then ran into the bedroom to grab socks and slip them on her feet.

“Stupid ticks,” she muttered, struggling to fit her sandals over the scratchy wool. Already her shoes were getting tight. They were hand me downs - everything she had was a hand me down- and soon they wouldn’t fit. She would hold off telling

her mother until they got painful, she always did, even when the blisters made her steps sting. There was no point in making her worry about things like shoes when sometimes their soup was flavoured with bones instead of meat.



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“One thing at a time.”

Focus. Focus. Focus. She remembered the words her Mere spoke as the plaster was laid on her chest, her voice like music with a strange rhythm. “Easy, not thick, thick. It’ll burn, one minute too long, eh.”

“I need mustard seeds.” She spoke it out loud in the driveway of her house, as if ordering at the deli counter at the store. She knew it was not the right time for mustard seed gathering. There were two times a year it could be found and one

was months behind while the other was months ahead. That meant she had to find it before she went into the woods.

Luckily, both her aunties lived just down the road. So that’s where she went first, her clumsy steps pushing gravel under her toes. She ran so fast the basket swung wild, bouncing off her thin hip. When she ran into her Auntie Ethel’s kitchen, she could barely get the words out, she was so out of breath.

Ethel didn’t need full sentences to understand; word had already reached her about her sister being taken to the town doctor. “Just sit there a minute. I’ll get what you need.”

Joanie stood, unable to retreat or rest for even a minute, while her Auntie went to the milk crate that served as her pantry and apothecary in one.

Later, with mustard seeds wrapped in cheesecloth at the bottom of her basket, Joanie stood behind the wooden church, facing the darkest part of the treeline. Behind her she could hear the Bay kicking up sand on the rocks with



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dragging waves. Ahead, the deep sigh of green and the subtle tear of growth. She took a deep breath and pushed into the woods.

Panic is not a navigator. Panic is a trick of the light, a screech in the dark, a false door in a solid wall. Panic led nowhere but in circles. Unfortunately, this was

just what she carried into the trees - panic. The steady weight of anxiety made her quiet, but the electric shock of panic pushed her to talk, even if she was alone.

“Wild onion. I’ve picked wild onion before.”

Hearing her voice out loud in here was not the comfort it should have been. It reminded her of waking up this morning alone. Being unanswered meant being unwatched; meant being alone.

“I hope you’re listening, Jesus,” she said to the slice of sky between the treetops. “Cause I have no one else to ask today.”

“I wish I knew songs with words,” she mused. “Sure would like to sing right about now.”

Instead she hummed – country tunes her cousins picked out on their passed-around guitars; lively reels that were tapped out with silver spoons on

denim. All the while, she walked. She remembered to keep her eyes on the ground, but it was harder than it sounds. Looking down meant missing the small twigs that whipped and the massive mosquitos that savoured the crook of her neck and the backs of her knees.



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Before she left Ethel's, Joanie got some advice. "Look for the damp spots, there. And don't go bush blind. You see a patch that looks like it could be it, check. Don't think it's gonna be all secret – could be a whole rug of 'em in a spot."

Her Auntie would have gone with her but her arthritis was acting up. She had to help the older woman back up when she'd picked through her medicines.

"Damp soil. Green rug. Keep your eyes open, Joanie," she reminded herself, over and over until it became a song she could sing.

"There!" In a small clear spot, under the protection of a thick elm, was a spongy mess of wide stalks. She ran to it, dropped to her knees and began to dig with her fingers. But what she uprooted was not wild onion.

"Star of Bethlehem is a look-alike," she remembered her mother explaining. "Looks like onion, but it's different. Not what we need."

"But if it's so much alike, can't you use it, still? It's not like we're gonna eat it," she'd asked.

"Onions absorb, pull that sickness right out." Edna had administered enough remedies, she'd seen it work. "Can't put a cut onion in the icebox or it takes on the taste of everything in there. Why? Because it pulls everything around it. So, we use it to draw sick out same way. Works best at the feet."

Joanie got up, brushed her dirty fingers on the front of her dress, grabbed up the basket and got back to walking. But when she passed the same split birch she'd leaned on an hour back, bitten to bloody and light headed from the hours without food or water, she sat down and cried.



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"Come on! Why can't I do this? I kept my eyes open. I didn't look away once!" She picked up a loose rock by her hand and, frustrated, threw it.

It crashed into a crop of strawberry plants and was answered by a quick burst of complaint. A starling flew out; almost tumbling the same way the rock careening in.

"Oh, sorry," Joanie sniffed.

The bird, unimpressed by the small crying child, chirped more anger and rustled its feathers.

"I'm having a bad day too."

The starling and the girl nursed their broken pride, separate but close, on the floor of the creaking forest. Joanie wondered if her mother was still breathing, if the doctor had found one of his town medicines to help her. Then she remembered the smell of that place – chemical clean and deep rot. Out here even the decay smelled like something beginning, like something turning into another.

The bird, which had been busy preening its shiny feathers, snapped its head straight and went very still.

"What is it?" Joanie whispered sensing attention being paid.

It took a tentative step, carefully lifting its scrawny leg and placing it down in slow motion. It reminded her of the tall birds that hunted at the edge of the water. It took a few more steps, then closed its eyes.



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“What are...”

Zip! As fast as a blink, the bird dove into the grass and came up with a fat, wiggling beetle. It snapped its beak open and shut a few times to snap into the shell before gulping it down. Then it flew away.

Joanie clapped, happy for a moment at the success of her friend. “Bravo! Well done.”

She clapped until it flew out of sight, then returned to her own failure. “Even a bird can hunt without eyes and me? What can I do? Maybe I should close my eyes...”

It was then that she remembered the squirrel, the one who had found the puffball. It too had used another sense besides sight. She remembered the twitching of its nose, the way it trusted that sense alone to guide it.

“How can you tell the difference between a Star of Bethlehem and real onion without digging it up,” she’d asked last season.

Edna answered questions one of two ways: with a story or with another question. “Well now, what lets you know when there’s an onion on the chopping block before you walk in the room?”

“The smell.” Joanie wrinkled her face at the thought. “The smell makes your eyes water.”

“That’s right. You can always smell an onion.”



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Joanie stood, used her eyes to bring her to a large clearing, then closed them and leaned into the scent. Only when it had brought her to a soft carpet of wide stalks did she begin to dig.

Basket full of green stalks and round, firm onion bulbs, Joanie burst out of the trees. She would head to her Auntie Flora's house. She needed her help with the preparation of the plaster and her telephone to call Percy back to drive her to the hospital.

When she ran by the front doors of the church, the starling was waiting for her, singing to beat the heavens, from the wooden sign promising salvation.

The chair in the hospital room was large enough to curl up on but uncomfortable enough to stay awake. If it weren't for the exhaustion filling Joanie's limbs and eyelids like sand, she never would have drifted off. But her work was done, the plaster had been set and removed in time, and now all she could do was wait. It wasn't long before she was snoring softly, scratching at the red welts on her legs in her sleep.

When Edna woke up her fever had broken. Her chest was sore, but there was space opening in her lungs like small, strong blooms. Turning her face toward the sunlight streaming in the milky window, she found Joanie curled up on that chair. The girl's scratched up arms were pulled tight under her head and her bare feet dangled off the cushion. Edna smiled. It was easy to forget this child, or any child, could be so still.



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“P’tit sourie,” she whispered, surprised that she had enough air now to form words.

Her bones ached and she felt the discomfort of her own long wheeze and stillness. Edna shifted in the narrow bed, kicking her legs to get out of the constraints of scratchy hospital sheets.

“Mon Dieu...”

Her feet were caught still, held tight. She lifted her head off the damp pillow and looked down to see she was wearing socks – Joanie’s old wool socks. Only, there was something stuffed in there. She wiggled her toes. Onions, sliced and raw up against her skin.

There was too much distance between the foot of the bed and her pillow for fumes to travel, but still, tears welled up. Her girl had listened. The lessons had stuck. Soon, she would get better, better enough to take Joanie back out into the woods. Better enough to go home, to tell stories, to welcome the relatives who would bring music and make soup even if it was only with bones.

A shape fluttered across the sun casting shadows across the sleeping child’s face. A small bird landed on the ledge outside. Together, Edna and the bird watched their girl sleep.

Edna wasn’t sure if she was talking to the bird or herself, but looking at her daughter’s face, feeling the comfort of old medicine working, she was certain.

“Everything will be okay. We will be just fine, us.”

- **Cherie Dimaline**