

and the whisper travels from man to man until it reaches us. He wants Elijah and me to come to him. We crawl over and he says, "Leave your packs here, boys. I want you to advance slow and silent like I know you can and figure out for me whether that is friend or foe over that little ridge."

We nod and slip our packs from our shoulders and I see Elijah slips his coat off too, so I do as well. I pick up my rifle and check the action and snap off the safety with my thumb. Elijah slips into the fog and I follow quick so as not to lose him. I listen for Elijah's quiet step and dip blindly into the fog, surfacing every little while by standing straight up to get my bearings before slipping back down again. I count off two hundred paces and I've lost Elijah, but know that he will be cutting to the left and will expect me to go a little to the right, just like we do when tracking moose. The ridge is a hump in the distance, only maybe one hundred and fifty paces ahead. Suddenly I hear the low warbling whistle of Elijah and answer it with my own. We both advance slow. I wish now I was wearing my moccasins and not these heavy boots.

Near the base of the ridge I pause and listen again. It is not a ridge at all but the lip of a large shell crater. Laughter is clear now and so is the clinking of metal cups. I see the dim flicker of a small fire. Whoever it is thinks he cannot be seen or heard in the fog and in the hole, but he is very wrong.

A voice rises up. The voice isn't English. I lie closer to the ground and strain my ears. If they have a sentry, he might be coming this way or might have his rifle pointed at me right now. I roll into the thicker fog and head left toward where I know Elijah will be. "It is not English they are speaking," I whisper in Cree when we are side by side and have retreated a safe distance into the fog.

Elijah nods. "I think it is the Belgian tongue," he answers. "What

"We'll have to go up the ridge and see."

We crawl back into the mist and when we reach the lip I signal for Elijah to go first while I cover. Elijah crawls up and peers over the edge, then signals for me to follow. I crawl to Elijah and peer down to where four men sit around a small fire with cups in their hands, as if they are a thousand miles from battle. Two have long moustaches that droop over their mouths. One is old and another looks no older than twelve winters. They wear a dark grey uniform, and round helmets with a ridge along the top sit by their feet.

Elijah suddenly stands up and walks down to them, rifle at his side but still ready to fire if need be.

"Hello!" he says loudly when he is in their midst. The men jump and two of them fall off their seats. "I am Canadian! Hello!" The men, once they've gotten over the shock, relax a little. Strange guttural words pour out of the mouth of one. Elijah just nods and smiles and repeats, "Yes! Yes! I do not understand! I am Cree Canadian!"

I stand up and click the safety back on my rifle and join Elijah. Once again the men in the crater look startled and I just nod and smile and take an offered cup. The cup's half full with wine and it tastes bitter in my mouth but I like the warmth and listen as Elijah asks them, "Where are the Canadians?" Two of the soldiers point and respond in English worse than mine that they are to the west of here, very close.

Elijah tells me as we make our way back to the company in the fog that best he could figure, the Canadians are only half a mile away.

Elijah reports to McCaan, who looks very relieved, orders the troops to pick up their packs and tells Elijah and me to lead them in the right direction. Thinking back on my first test I'm very proud of myself as we move silent and straight through the muck and find our

conceals itself. It was not until we were right upon them that we realized we'd found the group. Sentries called out and McCaan answered and we were taken in among the others. No fires are allowed so close to the front, and in the darkness I begin to make out forms of tents and men lying on the ground in blankets or sitting in small groups talking quietly to one another. They ignore us like we are ghosts floating by, and in the darkness with the shadows thrown across their faces and the long stare of eyes in cigarette glow I realize that these are the veterans of the last year's horrible fighting, that it's these men who are the walking ghosts. My first small trial is suddenly nothing in their eyes or in my own.

McCaan asks where the canteen is and we are directed to a large kitchen wagon. Inside, the smell of cooked food makes me realize I've not eaten in a long time. We pull out our bowls and fill them with stew that is burnt but tastes as good as fresh game right now. I clean my bowl with a chunk of stale bread that moistens a little with the dipping, and as soon as I finish my last bite the exhaustion falls across me and all I want is to find a place to stretch out and roll up in my blanket.

Our platoon keeps its distance from the others, the ones who have just been relieved from days on the front lines. My group is not a part of them, I realize, as I lie on my back on the hard ground of the woods. I stare up into the night sky and just as I drift off to sleep I can see exactly where I am clearly etched on the blackness broken by skeleton trees above me. This is where my life has led me. It's as clear as if I've been walking a well-marked trail that leads from the rivers of my north home across the country they call Canada, the ocean parting before me like that old Bible story nuns forced upon me as a child, ending right here in this strange place where all the world's trouble explodes.

I'm up the next morning before first light and reveille. A few men

smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. After a while one waves me over. I sit with them but they do not talk to me directly or ask my name. I can follow most of what they are saying. They talk of lost friends, of a winter battle where many died, of successful trench raids on the Germans. Bad fighting at Saint-Eloi through March and April, but now all's quiet there. None of them talk of home or what was left behind.

Finally, one of them asks me where I come from.

"Near Moose Factory," I answer, and the man knows where that is. "So you're an Indian, then?" he asks. I nod. "You're pretty short for an Indian, ain't ya?" The others laugh. "All the Indians around from where I come from are taller than you. But I guess that's the way the prairies grow 'em."

"Your battalion's just arrived, hasn't it?" the second one asks. I nod. "They'll be sending you up to the front lines today then, I reckon."

"We lost a lot of men last month," the first one says. "Fritz's getting more accurate with the big guns. With that kind of aim they don't need no offensive. They'll just blow us to kingdom come and that'll be the end of it."

The second man speaks up again, says, "A fella like you had better learn quick to keep his head down. Hun snipers are deadly accurate. There's one about, whose signature is shooting a man through the neck. How many has he got now, Smithy?"

The one named Smithy hasn't said a word till now. "At least a few dozen," he answers. "That I know of, anyways."

"Smithy here's a sniper himself—ain't ya, Smithy," the first one says. Smithy doesn't answer, doesn't look like he even heard the comment. I look at his rifle lying down beside him, at the notches cut into the stock of it.

"Smithy's gotten thirty-three confirmed kills, and many more unconfirmed," the second one adds quickly. "Most in our regiment.

Smithy shakes his head and looks away. He is small and skinny. He's going bald. He looks like a Hudson's Bay Company man I know back in Moose Factory who teaches Sunday school to the children who live on the reserve and not in the bush, the homeguard children. "That ain't true at all," Smithy mumbles. "There's another Indian feller goes by the name Peggy. Ojibwe, I think." He looks over at me. "He's got close to a hundred kills but no officer wants to give him credit since he likes working alone." Smithy suddenly stops talking and looks embarrassed that he's said so much. "Peggy's salt of the earth," he adds as an afterthought. "Every Canadian enlisted man knows he ain't no liar."

There's a long lull in the conversation. I guess they're thinking about what Smithy just said. I'd like to meet this Peggy.

"You sure don't say much," the first one says to me after a while. "You're a lot like Smithy here. Man of few words, eh?"

The second one laughs.

I smile. "I don't know much English, me," I say.

"You don't need to know much," Smithy says angrily, "for the job you been sent here to do."

I nod but know enough not to smile again.

After a time I go back to my sleeping place and lie on my back, stare up at the tree branches standing out black against the lightening sky. I close my eyes, and when I open them again it is Niska's face above me. She shakes me lightly in the new morning.

"You are shivering," she says, and asks me to sit by the fire.

M O N A H I K E W I N A T r e n c h e s

I LIE STILL BY THE FIRE and even the scent of warm bannock does not make me hungry. My guts are cramped like ropes bind them. My eyes ache in the sun that rises across the river, and the mist hanging over the water reminds me of the mist in early morning France. It's a heavy mist this morning, almost as thick as fog. The day will be warm.

Niska nudges me, her eyes questioning. She looks older than when I left, her hair mostly grey now. She's thinner, too, but wiry strong still. "I said that we will take our time on the river today," she says.

I watch her mouth to understand. All I am hearing this morning is a dull roar like rapids in the distance.

"Do your ears trouble you?"

I nod to her. My hearing leaves me more than it is with me any more.

The relief of taking a syringe from my kit and readying my arm washes over me almost as sweetly as the medicine itself. With Niska loading the canoe, facing away from me, I slip the point in the vein at the crook of my bruised elbow and lay my head back with a sigh. The struggle to keep memory away is no longer worth it, and minutes later as Niska helps me into the canoe and I settle against my pack, I let my mind go where it wants. She steers us into the current.

The mist still hasn't lifted much. McCaan tells us what a good thing that is. Sean Patrick and Fat are in front of me, and we crouch and move along a communication trench that leads us to the front trench. The whistle of shells keeps our heads down and when someone up the line slows down or stops, the ones behind bump into him. It is hard going. The bottom of the trench is covered in duckboards that keep our feet out of the mud and water that collects at the bottom. Normally, McCaan told us earlier, we'd come in at night, but the fog allows for us to move during the day. We were taught in training that everything happens at night. Digging and repairing, raids on enemy trenches, scouting and laying out of wire. "Darkness is your best friend," McCaan says over and over. "Not to learn that lesson will kill you, boys."

When stretcher-bearers come by, we squeeze to the side of the trench. I try not to look at the men being carried away, but occasionally I glance down at a face that is either contorted in pain or marked with a yellow *M* that means he has been given the medicine and is dreaming of the other place. It makes me think of Grey Eyes, and in thinking of that one I think of Elijah, too, who has become withdrawn and focused and serious since we came here. I see how Elijah's eyes glow, how he is feeding off the fear and madness of this place. He makes a good soldier. McCaan is very happy with him, I think.

Finally we reach the front trench. At least this is what those in front whisper. This trench looks the same as the others we've been working our way through for hours. But the soldiers here sit in twos and threes in holes in the walls, their faces thin and dirty so that their eyes look too white and big. Other men hold tall metal boxes against the wall and peer into them, watching what the other side is doing. These are the periscopes we were shown how to use not long ago. McCaan stops us and goes out in search of an officer.

Graves, the oldest of us, hisses at him, "Stomp that out, man. Fritz will see your smoke and lob a few right on top of us. Worse yet, an officer will come along and do far worse."

Gilberto is big and wide-shouldered and grows fruit back home. I like him because his English is as poor as mine. He drops the cigarette immediately and two soldiers sitting in a dugout beside us laugh at us as they light up their own.

"The action left Saint-Eloi a while back," one of them says, fitting the butt of his cigarette neatly into the place where his front tooth should be. "The dance is on the Somme now."

McCaan returns with an officer who is tall and hunch-shouldered and looks like he wants to cry. He speaks so quietly that I notice McCaan must lean toward him to hear, and they look for a moment like two old grandmothers telling secrets. The officer holds a long club with a heavy end and bangs it on the toe of his boot. McCaan motions to us and we begin to walk, heads bent, through men sitting and sleeping or talking in low voices to one another. Once in a while we pass a few snipers who have their Ross rifles ready behind squares of iron. A little door in the iron slides open and the sniper fires his gun before closing the square again, and then I hear the *ding* of German bullets hitting the plate. It is like a game, I think, but one that you don't want to lose.

We find the stretch of dirt and mud that is our new home and immediately start working to make it into something livable. Little shallow caves are dug into the sides as places to stretch out and sleep. We each claim what we can, and Fat begins complaining because there's not one big enough for him to fit in, so I grab his shovel and help him to dig out something larger. When I'm done I find Elijah, and we agree silently to share a space.

The rest of the day is busy and the men are nervous. We listen for the different times of shells and McCaan introduces us to a corporal

Thompson does a lot of explaining, but me, I can tell he doesn't like strangers much. "You hear the *thunk* of a mortar land close to you, know you can run away from it if you're quick. It's the only bomb you can do that with. The big shells you can hear coming from a long way off and just pray that they aren't heading for you. Now listen careful, boys, it's the smaller shells, the whiz-bangs, that are the most damaging, the ones that sound like a mosquito whining in the distance. You hear that coming and you dive flat into the earth and bury your nose deep as you can into the mud."

We listen wide-eyed and careful, and as if to emphasize Thompson's point, shells whine and roar and explode not so very far away. When one sings over us that is exceptionally clear, Thompson says, "Now that's Fritz's version of our eighteen-pounder. Blow a hole the size of a ditch into the earth."

Another shell flies overhead, this one whistling like a teapot come to a boil, and then it's gone. "That's the whine you've got to learn to be fearful of. Shell's only a four-incher but deadly accurate and efficient."

He stops talking and puts his hands in his pockets. Then he turns from us and walks away whistling.

We look at each other. "Now that's an odd one," Fat says.

I know, though, to listen carefully to what Thompson teaches me. In the late afternoon when we've reinforced our section of trench, Elijah and I lie on our backs and watch the aeroplanes above us soar and dive and fight one another. They are close enough that we soon learn to tell the shape of our own grey-and-black aeroplanes from those of the Germans. They swoop like ospreys and puff out little bits of black smoke. Once in a while a plane will falter, then spin down to earth and disappear over the hump of the trench.

"Me, I'm happy to stay on the ground on my belly in the dirt," I answer. "Thinking about falling from up there makes me sick."

Every night near sunset we are all ordered to stand-to, rifles at the ready, our heads just below the crest of the trench. We stand on what McCaan calls fire-steps, crouched, waiting for a German attack. This is ritual at dawn and at sunset, when both sides like to attack each other best.

This evening, McCaan squats beside me and smells of sweat and tobacco. He stares into a periscope over at the German lines and swears a lot because he has only the weak light the setting sun throws from behind us and can't see much of anything. He's jiggling around his periscope so much that he attracts a swarm of Hun bullets. I want to shout to McCaan to drop his head but the English words don't come in time, just a stream of Cree, but it's too late.

McCaan flies back onto the duckboards. The periscope is smashed beside him. I think that he has been shot in the head, because he doesn't move, but then he gets up groggily as if he's just woken up from a deep nap. One eye is so puffed that it is already shut closed, blackening by the second. He picks up the periscope and stares at it, muttering to himself. A bullet hole is punched neatly through the front, and the metal in back is ripped open. A medic rushes up, but McCaan pushes him away. A confusion flashes in his eyes that I've not seen before.

WE SPEND OUR FIRST MONTHS in and near Saint-Eloi. I like the nights best there. When evening falls the flares go up. Red and green, they illuminate the sky around us in the strangest hues of colour. These are the signal flares both sides use. It is as if I'm dreaming, staring up at this painted sky, shells whizzing above my head and

first day. Tonight he will take five of the new soldiers out to get them accustomed to working in no man's land in the dark. As Elijah and Sean Patrick and Gilberto and McCaan and me sit waiting and smoking, Thompson appears as if from the wall of the trench, and I realize that it is the hole where he sleeps.

"Corporal Thompson," McCaan says.

Thompson nods to him sharply, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. He is short enough that he doesn't need to hunch over in this trench. "Yes, Sergeant," he answers.

"How do you feel about taking us up above to give us a little taste of no man's land?"

"Very good, Sergeant," Thompson answers, and disappears into his hole.

Thompson reappears with a small bag strapped by his side. I see that he doesn't carry a rifle.

As if Thompson knows what I think, he says, "Not much good a rifle will do you up above when you're working. It will only get in your way." The others of us in the party unshoulder ours and lean them against the trench walls. "I want two of you to hold onto them, act as sentry while the rest of us work."

McCaan and Gilberto are the first to pick theirs back up.

"This way, gentlemen," Thompson says, and moves along the duckboards with almost silent steps. He leads us to a ladder, then climbs it, peering over the top before disappearing onto the earth above. First Elijah goes, and I follow. The others are close behind. I wait for the zing of bullets to come any second, but see that Thompson has led us to a place of mounds and craters where we seem to be covered from direct fire.

A white flare goes up nearby and Thompson, on his belly, goes very still so that I have a hard time seeing him just yards away. I follow his lead, looking at the scarred landscape all around without

peaceful, rock-strewn and muddy and silent so that it isn't difficult to forget I'm in the middle of a terrible place. In the dimming light I make out a grinning face next to me. It belongs to a soldier long dead, but I cannot tell from which side. His face is frozen in a perpetual smile, as if he is chuckling at what he knows.

When the light has died, my eyes have a hard time readjusting to the darkness. Thompson crawls up to me. I hear him rather than see him in the black that's descended.

"Blind as a bat right now, ain't ya?" he says close to my ear. "Next time keep one eye closed when a flare's up. It'll help your eyes adjust back faster."

I hear him scuttle away. My night eyes are back in time to see him stop in an especially large crater. He motions for the rest of us to come close.

"They say a shell never falls twice in the same hole, but don't believe them," he whispers. "I've seen it happen. But in a pinch and there's no other choice you are safest in a freshly blown crater." He pauses, listening. I listen too, and a sound like scratching comes to my ears. I listen as carefully as I can and to me it sounds like mice chewing through something. Elijah listens as well, and we look to Thompson to explain.

"That's our engineers below us digging," he says. "They're digging tunnels toward the Hun lines. They'll fill those tunnels with explosives underneath Fritz. When the time comes—boom!" He spreads his fingers, lifts his hands.

Elijah and I look at each other in disbelief. Thompson seems to be a serious one, so I have no choice but to believe him. "From this point forward," he says, "keep a close eye for Fritz. He's been busy here again. Look at our barbed wire. Make sure that it hasn't been cut. Note places that look like they've been mucked with. That's where Fritz crawls through."

We slip out of the crater one by one and make our way parallel

the constant shelling seems to have moved away from us. We make it to the stretch of barbed wire in front of our own position and Thompson examines it carefully. He motions and points to a place that has been cut through. We have no rolls of wire with us. Someone will have to come out later and fix it.

We turn and go back the way we've come. In another crater Thompson explains to us in a hushed whisper that he doesn't want to go farther down the line tonight. Our group is close to the point where the new companies are dug in, and the sentries will be nervous and inexperienced enough to mistake us for Germans and shoot at us.

When we are within yards of where we first emerged, I feel relieved. The others slip back down into the safety of the trench and I am standing, about to follow Elijah down the ladder, when a flare pops up and hovers right over me. I'm frozen there in full view and turn my head and get my first look at the German line. It is much closer than I had assumed and I realize how exposed I am now that the flare is dropping right above me, illuminating the ground like it is morning.

But still I do not move. I stare at the enemy for the first time. No faces, just a line of mounds behind barbed wire. I hear the bullet whip past my temple before I even hear the crack of a rifle, and all around me the ground sends up splats of mud and dirt and I feel an impact on my hand and it goes numb as other bullets whiz by very close. I dive like an otter toward the trench and before I know it I'm sailing down the wall and land hard on my side on the duckboards at the others' feet, the wind knocked out of me.

"You'd better lose that habit quick, Private," Thompson says, staring down at me, then walking away casually as I struggle to find

numb hand into his own and looks at it for a moment. "No Blighty for you on your first night out," he says. "You're just hit by a clump of mud knocked up from a bullet. It'll be sore for a while is all. Teach you a good lesson."

Back in our section of trench I lie in my little cave. My mind races with what's just happened, the sneaking about in such a dangerous place, being shot at for the first time. It is real. All of this is suddenly very real. The other side wants to kill me, and I've never even seen their faces.

I won't see it. It will just appear. The bullet so close to me tonight could have been a little more to one side. It is thrilling and horrifying at the same time. My hand begins to ache. I listen to Elijah carry on in English and laugh with Sean Patrick and Gilberto and Grey Eyes and Graves. Already Elijah is telling of his exploits. I hear him making this story bigger, more dangerous, though he wasn't even the one shot at.

I watch the flashes of an artillery barrage far down the line. The night sky is on fire.