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Marjolaine Mckenzie

I have worked as an organizer and community worker for over twelve years in my community in Matimekush-Lac John. My background has allowed me to meet the needs of diverse people—men, women, seniors, and young people. The objectives pursued within community projects vary according to the needs expressed, ranging from the improvement of the social and physical environment to the adoption of healthy lifestyles, better self-esteem, and a positive identity. In addition, I am aware of the realities of the communities. As well, for a long time, I have devoted myself to theatre as a hobby that has given me the chance to participate in several productions with the Indigenous company SpiderWoman Theatre in different cities of Canada and in New York. I love Indigenous stories, tales, legends, and it is through theatre that I can tell, discover, and rediscover them. I am very committed, which gives me a strong sense of belonging to my roots and it always pushes me to want to work as part of a team and to bring people together for causes that will improve the future of First Nations.

TEPATSTEMU

Where the nomads live, vibrations have been sent for millennia by the shaman-hunters kushapatshikan. These people are people of survival. Famine has long been the most formidable enemy for these nomads. The only way to counter famine was through rituals.

On a snowy road, in the pickup, Jeremy and Caroline are chasing caribou. The woman squints her eyes.

“Are they caribou that we see on the lake? With the full moon, it feels like seeing dancing shadows.”

At the same time, Stella, who takes care of the elderly, enters Mrs. Mckenzie’s house. She makes her a tea and sits in front of her. The Elder tells her:

“You and your ceremonies!”

After a silence, she adds, “Let me tell you a story.”

In the vigorous cold night, Nishapet woke up her daughter Annie, who was well wrapped up in warmth. Annie didn't want to wake up, she was too comfy.

“If you get up now, when we get to the next camp, I'll put a spoonful of sugar in your tea.”

Stella asks the Elder if she believes in spirits.

“I heard them when I was still living on the land. Sometimes they prowled around our tents at night. I heard them. My father used to say you have to stay indoors.”

“Were you afraid of spirits?”

“There were all kinds of spirits strolling through the territory. Some could frighten me. We felt them by getting shivers through our bodies or we felt the vibrations moving on the ground. I stopped feeling them when I learned how to pray. During our travels, we had met religious people. Spirits were chasing us and one of the priests showed me a prayer, aiاميةun⁵. He told me I had to recite it every time I was scared, and I didn't hear them anymore.”

Jeremy and Caroline begin to be pessimistic. Their chances of a kill are dwindling and it's getting late.

5. Prayer.

“It looks like the caribou are not here. It’s so quiet unless you put music on. You must put on Innu music! I think that if we sing, it can help attract them. We’re going to play Kashtin!” says Caroline.

Annie got up; she was still asleep when she got dressed to rush into the darkness of the night. She thought of the sweet tea her mother had promised her when they arrived at the camp, and that thought gave her courage.

For a few hours, she and her family had been walking toward a glow and Annie was whispering shakashtueu⁶. The sun began to rise, and the higher it rose, the more the snow struggled to support the weight of the sleds and footsteps of her group. The little girl could already smell the sweet tea. Soon, they would stop to settle.

In the light of the full moon, the caribou walk on the lakes, thus avoiding the intensity of the magnetism that walks in the forest, at the same time silencing the sound of their hooves, which could lead the hunters to them. Caribou understood a long time ago that magnetism had very little effect in water. They have fun dancing on the lakes in a circle while waiting for the vibrations to pass to continue on their way.

6. Sunrise or dawn.

After a long silence, the Elder turns to Stella.

“When the Innu were still travelling in the territory, not so long ago, there was this family of four children with their parents. This family was always out of the way, following the others far behind, pitching their tent away from everyone and eating only among themselves. It was said that the mother suffered from paranoid delirium, but no one worried because the group rarely saw them.”

In the pickup, Jeremy and Caroline eat bread while listening to Kashtin. The caribou are still not there.

“You should pray, the tunes aren’t working!”

Discouraged and tired, Caroline begins to pray in silence.

The Elder takes a more serious tone to tell Stella the rest of the story.

“The cold was beginning to be felt, food was becoming increasingly scarce, and travelling became almost impossible. The animals had disappeared, the ice had become too thick and too hard to be pierced. The nomads had decided not to move for a while. Everyone was exhausted.”

Annie observed the woman whom everyone feared a little. She placed a steaming dish of food near their tent.

“Mom, why does this woman have enough to eat when there is nothing left?”

“Eat, my daughter, eat. Thank her instead for her generosity.”

Jeremy looks at Caroline, still lost in her inner prayers.

“An Elder told me that our shamans prayed for days before finding the caribou. Today, the hunting ceremonies have been stopped, but they say that the vibrations of the ancients’ *teueikan*⁷ would still wander in the territory. They said that this was how nomads could identify caribou. We are warm in the pickup and there is no way to foresee them. We will go in that direction.”

Caroline is tired. She is not very enthusiastic and even grouches a little.

“We’ve been looking for them for days, we’ll have to go back. We have almost nothing left to eat.”

7. Drum.

The Elder continues her story in front of Stella, who is completely intrigued.

“A few days passed; the family no longer gave any sign of life. A man in the group asked the other men to check if the family was okay.”

At this precise moment, a particularly heavy silence falls on the house of the old woman and Stella gets a shiver that makes her hair stand on end.

The men went out in small groups through the raging cold.

“Mom, where is Dad going? Where are the men going?”

“They’re only going to make sure that the family is fine.”

“Mom, look! Little Ben is running behind the men!”

“Don’t worry. Come to bed now.”

“Oh Mom, why do you have to go to bed during the day and walk at night? I’m exhausted. At night, we should sleep.”

The little girl wrapped herself in the blankets and remembered that she had not seen the children of that family for days already.

Stella pours some tea into the empty cups. Mrs. Mckenzie continues her increasingly distressing story.

“Arriving near the family’s camp, the men felt the smoke coming out of the tent. As they approached, they heard the crackling of the fire. In their opinion, everything was too calm and normal. They entered.”

The nomads placed the shaman-hunter in a narrow tent with his drum. The vibrations of the teueikan could travel for days on the territory. If the shaman could not spot a caribou herd, he had to stay there without eating or drinking.

They’ve been driving for hours. They look at the road in front of them in silence. Jeremy slows down. Shadows move and big eyes shine in the night.

The Elder knows how to tell a story, and she pauses for effect. She drinks a few sips of her steaming tea before continuing.

“The men came out of the tent with slow and heavy movements, trying to scream, but without being able to make any sound. A sense of terror paralyzed them. Once they were out of the tent, they managed to extricate themselves from this invisible force that prevented

them from moving and hurried to join their families, to flee as far as possible.”

When the magnetism of the vibrations of the teueikan had joined the caribou herd, the shaman-hunter finally heard the hoof blows. He would come out of his tiny structure and point the hunters in the right direction.

Jeremy pulls out his gun. They are there, in front of him. He opens the door, but the caribou sense the danger and run away at full speed. He gets back behind the wheel, accelerates, and chases the caribou. Gunshots sound in the night.

Annie woke up. She heard screams and felt strong palpitations in her chest. Her father entered the tent, his eyes frightened, and he began to store their things in bags. Her mother hurried to help him.

Jeremy assembles the dead caribou. He then opens them one by one, through the belly, and first pulls out their guts. He continues by removing the skin and carefully cuts the sinew on each side of the spine. He finishes his work by cutting the heads, shoulders, and the joints of

the thighs. The pickup's headlights illuminate the man at work, creating distorted shadows.

The nomads decamped. The snow of the day was too light to support the sleds and their steps, but fear gave them superhuman strength to move forward. Little Annie joined her friend Ben.

“What was in the tent?”

“It's the woman... She cut up her children and her husband, as one cuts atikussats⁸.”

Caroline is standing on the path, and she feels chills running through her body. She turns to her man:

“Can you feel it? I feel like the ground is vibrating under my feet.”

The man looks at her and continues to place the cut pieces in the pickup. He starts the vehicle. Jeremy thought for a moment before answering her.

“It reminds me that Elders talk about caribou dancing in a circle during the cold of the full moon.”

“And they said why they did that?”

“No, they never said why they did that.”

8. Caribou.

The Elder looks out the window and notices a pickup truck parked in front of her house. She smiles.

“My daughter is back with Jeremy. They killed.”

Stella is shaken and wants to know the end of the story.

“What happened to the woman who cut up her family?”

“The woman remained alone and far from any living soul. It is said that other nomads saw her, but no one dared to approach her.”

The Elder in her rocking chair imitates the gestures of a monkey with tics.

“That’s how my grandfather Ben showed us how she moved. She was also wiggling when he entered the tent. Before fleeing, he looked at the pieces of human bodies hanging... like we hang caribou.”

Stella remains pensive for a long time. In recent times, her mother has been making the same gestures. Her hungry mother.