

# EEYOU

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One beautiful and joyous morning, my dad and I had left the community to go ptarmigan hunting along the shores of the river. Sitting on the trailer, with my dad pulling me with his skidoo, I remember feeling so special and this tremendous happiness flowing through my scrawny body and into my heart. There is nothing more important than a little boy wanting to spend time with his dad, especially out on the land to harvest ptarmigan, for me anyways. I must have been seven years old, maybe eight, and my father and I had been travelling along the scenic shores of what my people call Chisasibi, meaning the Great River. Chisasibi Iiyiyiuch, the People of the Great River, have always travelled on this river by snowshoe and canoe for hundreds and hundreds of years. It was a route they knew intimately and, for many clans, a way to access their hunting grounds, today referred as traplines. The river has provided them with an abundance of animals to sustain their way of life, to connect with the land, and maintain their culture. For the Cree of James Bay, the first teachings for young boys

to becoming potentially good hunters was to go with their dads or grandfathers so they could harvest small game, whether it was their first ptarmigan, grouse, or rabbit. The boy would learn from watching his mentor the way to harvest the animals, how to clean them, or how to track them, and it was always done in a respectful manner. The James Bay Cree men play an important role in the upbringing and childrearing of a young man... It is their sacred responsibility. And on this day, it was my time for the knowledge to be passed down to me. It was an exciting occasion for any Cree boy, and I was no exception.

As a Cree boy, being out on the land with my dad and spending time with him was my biggest joy in life, and shooting so many ptarmigans was just a bonus. But our hunting had to be halted... for now. A few kilometres from our community, at the mouth of the Great River, my dad stopped. On the horizon he saw a blizzard and had to turn back. As he manoeuvred his skidoo toward where we had come from, I was standing on the trailer with both hands on the ledges of the trailer and was trying to sway it from side to side. I was having the time of my life, but I must've swayed a little too hard because I flipped the trailer as it turned, and fell out of it and onto the snow. I was still laughing when I stood up, but the trailer flipped back onto its runners and I saw my dad continuing into the distance. I knew at that moment he was not aware of what had happened, and the joyous occasion suddenly turned into a chase, with me running after my dad in fear. I remember taking off my skidoo pants because I thought I could run faster—and I did, but not fast enough to catch up to him. As he

disappeared into the bay, tears started rolling from my eyes onto my cheeks, and the tears froze because of the cold weather. I eventually got tired of running, but I kept on walking and followed his trail. It wasn't long after that the blizzard was upon me, and it started to blow over my dad's trail until I could not see it anymore. I felt cold and scared. After walking in the blowing snow for a while, in the distance I saw headlights of what seemed like a skidoo. It was my dad who found me in the blowing snow, and the happiness returned as quickly as it had been overshadowed by fear. "Where do you want to sit?" he asked me, and I replied, "With you." He smiled and said, "Come on then" and we rode off across the bay and back to my community.

As we headed back to what was formally known as Fort George, a beautiful and peaceful island situated on the mouth of the Great River, I remember thinking, *I am home*. The island of Fort George was on the eastern coast of James Bay, Quebec, 1,400 kms north of Montreal, but the village had to be relocated a few kilometres from the island, to what is now our present community, Chisasibi. In 1979–1980, the People of the Great River were indeed forced to abandon their peaceful and serene community and relocate to the mainland because of Hydro-Québec development. But I remember that day, chasing after my dad along the shores of the Great River and in the middle of a winter storm, like it was yesterday. I remember because it wasn't always like that with my dad: all my life I felt like I was chasing him, chasing after his approval, his attention, his acknowledgment, and his time. The destruction of the land because of a mega hydroelectric project wasn't the only impact the

People of the Great River felt. There was also a loss of cultural identity from the impacts of colonialism. Many Cree children were taken away and relocated into foreign systems known today as the residential schools. My dad was one of those children. At the tender age of six he left the comfort and safety of his parents and his community.

I don't know the extent of what happened in those residential schools and my dad never talks about it. But whatever happened or whatever they did to him as a child followed him as an adult, and came out when he was drunk. And he was a mean drunk. He became very violent toward my mother and occasionally to me and I became fearful of him. I saw adults partying in our home and they would fight each other and eat all our food. Growing up, I had become bitter toward him, and I remember thinking, *When I grow up, I will kick his ass*, and, *I will never grow up to be like him*. When he wasn't drinking, he was funny and always affectionate toward my mom, but I think it was the guilt from the fights and arguments. I didn't know at the time—I thought I would never be like him—but, well, I grew up like him. I too was a drunk. I couldn't drink like a gentleman or responsibly because when I drank, I had to get intoxicated... just like my dad. I learned some of his behaviours too, behaviours that were hurtful toward others, especially those I loved. His past wounds from the residential schools became mine. Sometimes I felt like the residential schools stole my dad from me. I blamed them for many things, I blamed my dad for many things, and I also blamed the world. Growing up, I became rebellious, which got me into trouble with the law and with other authorities. I didn't know my own

identity and I had become someone else, a bitter young man and eventually an angry man. I carried so much pain inside me.

Today, twelve years into my sobriety, I have forgiven my dad. I think that is one of the key elements to real change, forgiveness. I think the day I forgave him was the day I stopped chasing him. I had to find a way to change, to be a better man than I was before. My dad and I are reconciling with one another. He too is sober now. He's no longer a drunk. Our father and son relationship isn't perfect but rather a work in progress. My dad is old now, and I am happy I found it in my heart to forgive him, to get to know him, to reconnect with him. He also went through a lot as a child, he lost a lot, and he too was hurt as a child. But in the end, I stopped blaming him for things. I also stopped blaming the world for my problems. Today, he grieves for something else; he longs to be out on the land, hunting, which he can no longer do. He longs to be where he belongs, where he feels like he's home. I, on the other hand, continue to go back out on the land every now and then, learning the ways of my people, reclaiming my cultural identity.