

BEARWALKER

smoke and his eyebrows are bushy enough to nest whisky-jacks. Whenever I visit him, he tells me about last night's dreams as he boils us water for tea.

His parents and his wife and two of his sons who are dead now come talk to him all the time when he is sleeping. They tell him how their day was and scold him for not eating right or for his rare habit of going on a bender for a couple of days, drinking bottle after bottle of Cold Duck. Antoine's father retells stories of how he and Antoine's grandfather used to live in the bush for weeks at a time, trapping beaver and lynx and hare. His father talks to Antoine only in Cree and his sons talk to him only in English, so there are many times I have to explain expressions his sons have used the night before, the best I can translate them into Cree.

⇒ There was a time years ago when Antoine experienced a bad sickness. He doesn't talk about it much, only told me about it once. He got sick so that he didn't want to get out of bed. Kids came at night and threw pebbles at his window or scratched tree boughs across it so that he might be fooled into thinking it was a bear. Drunks would show up in the early hours and talk to one another outside his door. Antoine bolted his door by jamming knives into the crack between the door and frame. He didn't want kids or drunks seeing him when he was sick like that. He lay on his couch for a week, sipping only water and sleeping bad.

At the end of that week, the Lord came with two helpers. They were all dressed in black suits with white button shirts. The Lord sat by Antoine for a long time, holding his hand and talking to him in Cree about scripture. The Lord talked and Antoine listened while the helpers boiled tea and swept the place out and fixed a couple of broken chairs and taught

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Boyd  
Version 2008

themselves to make tamarack birds using one of his as a model.

"I want you to believe in me," the Lord told Antoine. "My name has been used to pit Indian against Indian, and I don't like that. You can help me make a difference here." Antoine thought about that for a long time, and finally nodded his head OK. "I'm going to give you a special gift," the Lord told Antoine. "I guess you could call it that. You can see into people, see what is bothering them. It might be physical sickness. It might be something in their thoughts. I want you to believe in me."

Antoine nodded. The Lord and his helpers left. Antoine felt better not long after that and got up. The knives were still in the exact place he'd left them. ←

That was a long time ago and, even though he never talks of that incident, Antoine's reputation as a medicine man has grown. He's one of the few people with the respect of both the Christian and the old-school Indians around here. As he hands me a blue tin mug of tea, I know he knows something is up with me. He's good at that. I used to try and mask what I felt in the past, acting happy and silly when I was sad, quiet when I had good news to share. He always knows, though.

"He's back, eh?" Antoine says, sitting down in his chair by the stove.

"Yeah," I answer. "Me and Raymond and Michael beat him up today, too."

"I know," Antoine says. I look at him. His powers are getting strong in his old age. "My nephew came by and told me," he says. "There's no such thing as a secret on this reserve. Only old news."

"He hit Gloria," I say. "I had no other choice but to do what