

The collected stories in this book represent fifty years of visiting indigenous, autochthones, and First Nations people in Canada. Relatives, elders, and tribal story tellers gave me these stories, which I offer back to Canadian and American readers of Native American fiction to honor my heritage and culture.

**KANATA TALES:
VILLAGE TALES OF CANADIAN FIRST NATIONS**
by Jacques L. Condor

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KANATA TALES:

Village Tales of
Canadian First Nations



Jacques L. Condor
Maka Tai Meh

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Contact the author at:
waltergoralski@yahoo.com or makataimeh@earthlink.net

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5:
THE VOICE OF THE WENDIGO
MANITOBA

In the middle of October, the Moon-When-the-Leaves-Drop, an Ojibwe hunting party camped on a rock ledge near a pebbled beach on the northeast shore of Lake of the Woods. There crude shelters of bark slabs and tanned hides clustered in the lee of a brush and scrub covered cliff. Smoke came from the smoke holes of every lodge and slid downward to the ground; a sure sign that foul weather was approaching.

At the far end of the spit of land pointing north, a group of four women sat close to a cooking fire. They attempted to bake twists of bannock bread on willow sticks over the coals but the shifting winds blew the fire smoke into their faces repeatedly. The women constantly shifted positions to avoid the smoke. They wore hide robes; hair-side in, over their trade-cloth dresses. The ground frost and the chill of the wind from the lake kept them huddled close together. The youngest of the four wore the voluminous apron favored by the Canadiennes in the eastern settlements. The woman's hair was in a single, thick braid hanging down her back past her waist. She worked at roasting three large pike on spits above the cooking fire. The wind-shifts were irritating but at least the fire kept her warm. The weather, in the pre-dawn hours, had stayed cold. Ice formed a crust at the edges of calm water in the inlet. Clouds of sweet smelling alder wood smoke billowed from the fire. She plucked up the hem of her apron to wipe her eyes, which teared because of the smoke. She stepped away from the smoke and walked to the edge of the lake. Far out on the water she saw canoes. She picked up a large maple leaf from the ground. With the red leaf held as an eyeshade against the dawn light slanting across the water, she was able to see three canoes moving toward the lake shore where she stood.

The young woman, *Na-Mid-Ni-Gig*, Otter-Who-Dances, recognized the canoes by the clan symbols painted on their bows. She gave a shout and waved at the paddlers. The other women hurried to the shore and waved and called to the men in the canoes. Otter-Who-Dances was glad to have her husband, old uncle and nephews back in camp even if it did mean more work for her. The men of the band had been gone two days on a moose hunt and she hoped they carried meat in the birch bark canoes.

The hunting party drove their craft with long swinging strokes of their paddles. They came closer and she could see the up-turned, split-root laced prows of Ojibwe birch bark canoes rode high in the water. She knew the hunt had not been a success. *This is a meat-making camp, monswiids, moose meat, and no meat is brought into the camp today.* She thought. She turned and ran up the path to the fire; hoping her fish had not scorched or burned. They were ready to eat and she removed the spits from the fire and ran back to the shoreline.

"Ish, Nin widigeman. Hello, my husband," She called out. "Good you are back safe. My Uncle, Red Cedar, welcome back." The canoes nudged ashore and the man she called husband jumped from the lead canoe. He held out his arms and the woman ran into them. She joked and tried to make light of the failed hunting trip, "It seems like we must all learn to eat more fish."

"I have eaten enough pike to grow my own gills," the man said. "As for moose or deer we did not see any sign no matter where we looked."

"Your husband, Prairie Fox, is telling the truth," Old Uncle Red Cedar said. "I think some spirit monster has frightened away all the game on this side of the lake."

"Do not speak of spirits, Uncle," the young woman said respectfully.

"Otter-Who-Dances gives you good advice, old man," Beaded Corn, one of the elderly women said.

"If there was such a monster spirit I would have found its tracks when I searched for moose sign," Prairie Fox said. "You think I could not track a Wendigo?"

There was sudden and somber silence among the members of the hunting camp at the words of the young hunter.

“Husband,” Otter-Who-Dances said. “You know better than to speak that name. Go at once and give tobacco to the fire and pray the name you spoke was not heard.”

* * * * *

Midjim, food, was prepared that night. Prairie Fox grumbled as he picked clean the bones of the roasted walleye pike. He stuffed a handful of *menomin*, wild rice into his mouth to cover the taste of the fish. None of the others complained of the fish they had eaten for the last seven meals in camp but everyone talked about moose or deer meat while they ate.

“When moose are not plentiful on this side of the lake, as is the case this season, we must go north to old Fort St. Charles,” Red Cedar said, “Do you know that place?”

“I have passed that ruin fort many times,” Prairie Fox answered.

“It is good you know the route to the fort. From there we can go further inland to better hunting grounds,” *Mitigumi* said. Red Cedar shrugged and was silent for a moment.

“What bothers you, Uncle?” Prairie Fox asked. “If the northern land is the land of many moose, what more do we need?”

“Much good luck,” the old man said. Prairie Fox laughed and placed his arm about the old hunt leader. “I have a special medicine for good luck my wife gives me when I leave to hunt.”

“And what is this special medicine?” The old hunter asked,

“I will share a bit with you,” Prairie Fox pulled Red Cedar close to his chest and said, “It is *Sagiiwewin*, love.”

Red Cedar slapped Prairie Fox on the chest. “*Sagiiwewin*. You think I don’t already know this medicine? Ask my three wives.”

Prairie Fox bent and kissed the top of Red Cedar’s head. “There is a bit of my good luck medicine for you.” He released his embrace of the old man.

“One such kiss from Prairie Fox on the head is indeed lucky for me. His kiss will kill any lice I may have. I thank you for grooming

my hair.” At this the group fell to laughing and making kissing sounds at each other.

The women made a clean-up of the meal scraps and the men moved to a sandy spot with a few beach rocks for seats. After arranging themselves on the rocks, the real business of planning a moose hunt began with the smoking of a communal pipe.

Otter-Who-Dances kept her ears toward the circle of men to learn what she could of the plans to take moose. She heard her Uncle’s voice rumbling low in his chest as he spoke.

“Many hunters have returned to their lodges empty handed.”

The young woman stepped closer to the circle of men the better to hear. Her Uncle asked for plans or opinions that might help lead them to the elusive moose.

Her two nephews, *Mitigumi*, Oak-Tree-Man, who had thirty snows, the same age as her husband and *Nah-wa-kwa*, Stands-In-The-Middle-Of-The-Forest who was not yet a man, having seen only fourteen winters, sat across from Red Cedar. The pipe had passed around the circle four times by now. The air grew chilly. Otter-Who-Dances drew her bear robe tighter and continued to listen to the men’s conversation. Across the fire from the youngster, sat a man of about forty or fifty snows. He was not *Anishinabe*. His clothing was not that of the people of the lakes and his hair was cut short like the *Kitchi-Mukoman*, the ones called Americans. Red Cedar explained the man was Cree, a *Kinishtino*, from the far northeast of the lake people. He was called in his Cree language *Sikos*, The Weasel. The woman listening thought it a good name for the man because his small black eyes glittered in the firelight like those of his namesake. His narrow face and pointed chin added to the resemblance.

“This fine hunter and tracker of the *Kinishtino* people moves slowly and carefully on the trail and in his life. He is always cautious and takes his time. This I admire in a man,” Red Cedar said. The Cree was obviously embarrassed by Red Cedar’s comments. The Weasel poked at the fire with a stick and looked down at the toes of his moccasins.

“*Megwitch*, I thank you, *Mish-Wa-Wak*, my friend.”

Otter-Who-Dances served the men hot Oswego mint tea in gourd cups and returned to her place in the shadows to hear the Cree and her husband discussing the route the group would take to the lakes where moose might be found. They would make the journey in three canoes. The Cree used a stick to draw the outlines of the lakes on the sand. He knew each of these lakes and saw them clearly in his mind. The man *Sikos* had traveled these wild waterways since childhood. Their route would be up the narrow northern part of Lake of the Woods into Crowduck Lake. From there, the band of hunters would cut diagonally across a place called *Noh-Pi-Ming*; and finally to *Wabuskawin* Lake where they would make a base camp from which to hunt. The planned route was complete, but not everyone was happy with the plan.

Prairie Fox complained, "I have been up that way and there is not much but slabs of rock, trees and thick moss and grey lichen in all those rocky places."

"It is open land in the centre of deep woods and the moose cannot hide from us among the trees. I have taken moose and even caribou in that place," The Weasel said.

Prairie Fox only nodded to show he would accept the plan and the place.

* * * * *

Otter-Who-Dances was to go along. The three older wives of Red Cedar would stay at Lake of the Woods. The young woman and the boy *Na-wak-kwa* would live at the base camp at Lake *Wabuskawin*. She would attend to the one meal of the day each evening and dress out and prepare any game the men brought in. The youngster was to keep her company and see that the fires around the camp were kept burning as protection against marauding bears. The hunters would form teams to hunt in pairs. Prairie Fox and the younger man *Mitigumi* together and Red Cedar and the Cree the other pair.

* * * * *

That night they packed what they would need. Otter-Who-Dances filled her carrying basket with extra warm clothing for herself

and her husband in the event of colder weather. She carefully packed moccasin soles cut from moose hide, her awls, woman's knife, needles and several packets of sinew. With these things, she could mend anything that might rip or need repair. Her husband filled his back pack with fire starting tools; a bag of dried tinder, gunpowder and balls for his muskets.

He placed his gloves and fur hat in the back basket and laced the top shut. They were ready for the morning sun and the journey north. Otter-Who-Dances put out the tallow candles with wetted fingers and the pair prepared for sleep.

"There is something I want to tell you, wife," Prairie Fox said.

"Tell it quickly because I am ready for sleep."

"It's about the Cree man, *Sikos*. I hunted with him before and although he is a good man he is a strange one."

Otter-Who-Dances sat up, "How is he strange?"

"The Weasel keeps to himself. He has no family. I think he is most happy out in the bush---but when he's a long time in the bush country he gets sad inside his heart and sits around ignoring other hunters. I don't like this," her husband said.

"Why does it bother you? If the man wants to be silent and alone, then let him be."

"He sits by himself and looks at things only he can see. He talks to himself and says the bush country is the home of an evil spirit and have I seen it? I told him I don't see spirits and he said 'Don't you hear him whistling and calling?'"

The things her husband was saying intrigued Otter-Who-Dances. She asked him what the Cree man had answered.

"He said this: *There is one big animal who knows the name of everybody who goes into the bush*. He said anybody who sees this thing never lives to tell about it. He said many have heard it. He told me, *Some day, you're gonna hear this thing whistling and calling your name*.

"Do you know what he was describing?"

"Yes, I know what he was talking about. It was the thing you didn't want me to call by name. The thing I burned tobacco in the fire and prayed didn't hear me. I told the Cree and I am telling you, it is

never going to happen to me.” The woman lay quietly beside her husband. She felt a chill in spite of the warmth of the heavy furs.

She shuddered involuntarily. Memories of legends the old ones told filled her thoughts. She conjured images of ghosts and wild men of the woods. She forced her thoughts away from ghosts and evil beings, but nothing could stop the chill and she shivered again. The fear of something ancient that really existed; terrible and deadly made her tremble. Her husband, feeling her shudder asked if she needed more fur coverings.

“No, my husband. Your body close to me will warm me.” She snuggled against him, felt his arms wrap around her and the heat from his body. She clutched at his arms and relaxed into his embrace. She knew sleep would follow after their passions subsided.

* * * * *

Prairie Fox slipped from their shelter and made his way to the lakeshore at dawn, hoping to shoot a goose or duck for the camp breakfast. The thought of another meal of fish spurred him on. Otter-Who-Dances woke minutes later and stirred the coals to rebuild the cooking fire. She took advantage of her husband’s absence to question her Uncle while they took warmth from the fire.

“Brother of my Mother,” She began in a formal way. “There is something I would ask you about the Cree man, Weasel if you will permit it.”

“Ask your questions, my favorite niece,” he replied.

She filled his maple wood bowl and replaced the kettle in the warm ashes of the fire.

“My husband tells me that the Cree man is a silent man who prefers his own company and has the ability to see what others cannot see. Is this true?”

Red Cedar considered the question in silence before he answered. “The man has spells of a strange, silent sadness when no person can induce him to speak. I do not know what sorrow he carries in his heart that makes him behave as he does. As for seeing things that others cannot---this he does---and smells and hears them, too.”

The woman was about to ask her uncle if the Cree saw evil spirits when he held up his wooden bowl for more *anissabo* soup and continued speaking.

“The way *Sikos* sees, hears and smells things in the bush is the reason he is such a great hunter and tracker known to all the people of the lakes.”

There was no more time for questions. Prairie Fox returned without game birds and grumbled as he sipped his soup. He picked up his carrying basket, slung it over his shoulder and said it was time to get to hunting. His wife picked up her backpack and waited for her uncle to stand.

“My friends, I am ready.” Red-Cedar said.

The three headed for the lakeshore where the other three members of the hunting party waited. The canoes were packed. The stern paddlers took their positions and the bow paddlers leapt into the bow of the canoes and waited for a sign from their hunt leader.

Red Cedar raised his paddle in a salute to the others and shouted, “We go!”

* * * * *

Their journey took five suns of paddling and portage with four nights of rest stop camps before the party of six reached *Wabuskawin*, the Lake of Rabbit Skins.

* * * * *

Otter-Who-Dances and the young boy, *Nah-wa-kwa* constructed three small, round wickiups of bent and tied saplings with coverings of balsam and hemlock branches. They stored their utensils and food stuffs in woven bags tied on let-down ropes high in trees out of the reach of animals that might visit the camp. A large fire ring in the center kept all the lean-to shelters warm and comfortable. Several small fires at night discouraged bears and grey wolves.

The woman and boy worked at campsite duties when the hunters went in search of moose. The young boy set snares and caught rabbits, grouse and an occasional squirrel for the stew-pot. The lake fish were easy to catch but the men always complained when the

evening meal was just fish and bannock bread. Otter-Who-Dances tried to prepare a variety of foods but it seemed all the men could think of was roast moose haunch. The Weasel never said anything against the food he was given; he simply took his bowl and walked away to sit some distance from the others. Otter-Who-Dances found the Weasel was different from other Cree she had met. He was quick to take offense, taciturn, stubborn and very superstitious. Otter-Who-Dances observed the men of the camp while she fed them. The boy stacked firewood and sang to himself. Above the cluster of lean-to shelters, she saw the lights danced in the sky. Each night became colder. Each night, in the darkness, the forest seemed to steal forward like a party of raiding warriors; ready to slip in and destroy everyone as they slept. Otter-Who-Dances silently thanked the Creator for the gifts of fire and a husband who would protect her from anything out there in the dark night.

* * * * *

The morning sun was a grey ball that gave little warmth to the men huddled around the central fire pit. A mist that became a drizzle wet everything and everyone in camp. Otter-Who-Dances carried bowls of hot Oswego tea to the men around the fire. All of them wrapped tightly in robes against the chill of the drizzle.

Red Cedar rubbed his hands together held them palms outward to the warmth of the fire. "There is a lost lake hidden among the trees in the forest over there. Perhaps moose will be up that way." He sipped tea before he spoke again. "This water is called *Lac Bete Grisse*. I have been there before. It is a strange country." The Weasel snapped his head around and stared at Red Cedar. Prairie Fox saw the hunt leader send a quick message with his eyes, but he did not understand what was passed to the Cree in the stern look of Red Cedar.

The Cree said, "*Ka, Kawin! Kawin bapish!* No! Never! That won't do!"

Otter-Who-Dances was startled by the harsh tone the Cree used.

Red Cedar said, "*Madji...Nameskwa. Nagikawa.* Not now. This is not the time. It is nothing."

The Weasel spoke rapidly in Cree; a language the others could not understand as most of them knew only a few phrases in that dialect. Otter-Who-Dances watched her Uncle's face as he tried to regain his composure. He answered the Weasel in Cree, which he spoke well. Red Cedar's words and the calm he projected while speaking them had the desired effect on Weasel. Both men extended their arms to each other in a gesture of friendship.

Red Cedar said, "We will leave even if this rain keeps trying to defeat our plans. I go with the Weasel in my canoe and Prairie Fox and *Mitigumi*, will travel together as partners."

"If we are separated, where will we rendezvous?" *Mitigumi* asked.

The Uncle described a rendezvous point at the mouth of the river that ran from Lake *Wabuskawin* to empty into *Lac Bete Grisse*. *Sikos*, the Weasel did not like the rendezvous plan. He went silent, but this time his silence seemed to convey something more than disapproval. Otter-Who-Dances saw a flicker of a strange expression across the Cree man's face. It flashed quickly like a burst of flame from tinder tossed on a campfire. The woman thought it was an expression of fear but did not speak of it to her husband. The Cree's expression had sent a chill to her heart.

* * * * *

The woman and the boy stood on the rocky shore watching the others head up the lake to the river to *Lac Bete Grisse*. They waved and kept watch until the canoes were out of sight. They returned to the campsite. With everyone gone, the boy said the place felt lonely. The woman chided him but in her heart she also felt isolated and vulnerable; a fear grew in her heart; a fear she could not give a name.

* * * * *

The hunters pushed themselves hard. Near the lost lake, just after nightfall, they set up camp. *Mitigumi* built a large fire. The bright blaze enabled the men to erect two shelters. Later, three of the men sat on their heels, eating and talking at the fire pit. They passed around a bag of parched corn *mandamin* and ate jerked deer meat as they

talked. Prairie Fox glanced to the riverbank where the Cree sat squatting on his haunches, arms wrapped about his bent knees, staring in the direction of *Lac Bete Grisse*. *Mitigumi* handed the bag of mandamin to Red Cedar and spoke.

“Is there some reason no one goes to this lost lake?”

Red Cedar knew that *Mitigumi* was making an oblique reference to the Weasel’s outburst and behavior. He passed the bag of parched corn on to Prairie Fox before he answered.

“There is no reason. Six winters ago the fire came through here and burned the willows the moose feed upon. It’s been seven years since hunters have gone there. We will make meat tomorrow.” His words were meant to give encouragement.

Prairie Fox looked toward the river. He saw the Cree leave the riverbank and come to the fire. So silent was *Sikos’* approach Red Cedar and *Mitigumi* were startled when he crouched down across from them. A swift gust of wind blew the fire’s embers into flame. All saw the expression on the Cree man’s face. It was the same expression the Weasel wore when resigned himself to Red Cedar’s plan and reluctantly agreed to go to the lost lake. Prairie Fox covertly studied the Cree. The man felt someone watching him and looked back at Prairie Fox. The look in the Weasel’s eyes betrayed him. In an instant Prairie Fox knew the Cree was scared. Prairie Fox spoke; trying to diminish what he had seen with a bit of forced humor.

“What’s the matter, *Sikos*? You think maybe some of our Dene enemies hunt up at the Lake, eh?” The Cree did not respond.

Mitigumi saw Weasel did not want to explain his behavior. He draped his arm around his Cree hunting companion and said, “You are just afraid of old tales about the creature we never speak of. Is that not so my brother-friend?” Again, the Weasel did not answer. He stood up abruptly, turned and stood staring and listening

“*Eh, Bien.*” Prairie Fox said. “Me, I go *fait dormier*, sleep.” He stretched his arms as far as he could spread them. “I’ll be up early to shoot a moose for my woman.” *Mitigumi* and Red Cedar went off to their shelter as soon as Prairie Fox left the fire circle.

The Cree stood alone in the darkness. Something rode on the night winds wafting among the great trees. Something...an odor...a

sound or both, he hardly knew just what. He shrank back from the forest. This something...this warning had touched him with frigid fingers. He heard the sound, far off in the distance; coming from the mist-blanket over *Lac Bete Grisse*. The sound, barely perceptible even to his ears so attuned by his fear, was a high-pitched whistle. He trembled. As quickly as they had come, the scent and the sound faded.

In their shelters, the sleeping hunters stirred in uneasy sleep as the fading odor and the faint whistling sound invaded their dreams and slipped silently out again to be borne away on the night breeze. In their slumber, only a forbidden name remained—*Wendigo*.

The Cree man put his hands over his mouth so he could not speak the name. The words of the old ones warned him. *To speak the name of the beast was to call the creature to you.* Fear overwhelmed him. He had heard the voice of the *Wendigo*. His trembling increased. The Cree's mind whirled; pulling him down into a waiting blackness. He collapsed unconscious.

* * * * *

Next morning, Prairie Fox stirred the embers of the fire and the Weasel joined him without acknowledging a greeting. The Weasel pointed a willow stick at the few centimeters of snow that had fallen during the night.

Red Cedar and The Oak-Tree joined them at the fire. "Ho! This is good!" said Red Cedar. "The wind has changed it blows away from the lake so your scent will not reach the moose. This snowfall will help track our game. The moose are already in our meat caches." The others laughed with Red Cedar but the Cree chastised this overconfidence. Everyone seemed eager to depart but the Cree.

He said, "Go without me, I am not needed. Anyone can follow moose tracks in snow this deep." The other hunters did not insist the Cree join them.

"We go up-river to the East side of the lake," Red Cedar said. "Now let us go before the moose decide to go someplace else." The lead hunter hurried to his canoe picked up his canoe paddle and jumped into the birch bark craft with agility the belied his age. He

paddled into the fog veiling the river mouth. Prairie Fox and *Mitigumi* followed in the grey, pre-dawn light.

Red Cedar said, "*Jawendagoshiwin*. Good Luck." For the benefit of Prairie Fox who liked to pretend he spoke the language of the white *voyageurs* he added, "*Bonne Chance!*"

Dawn made a red glow in the fog. The canoes were far apart. The paddlers in one canoe could no longer see the other. The two men paddled close to shore; breaking the thin surface ice as they advanced. *Mitigumi* looked for moose sign but saw none. The trees grew taller and thicker along the shore, Prairie Fox knew the dangers of trusting this thick tangle of brush and giant trees. They were without mercy and their treatment of the unwary could be a terrible thing. He stopped paddling and looked at the woods near a bend in the shoreline. A silent warning came to him from those trees. *Mitigumi*, made a sudden hissing sound. Prairie Fox turned and *Mitigumi* pointed with his paddle to the thick brush at a flat gravel beach jutted into the water. The Oak made another sign for 'listen' and cupped his hand to his ear. Prairie Fox listened. The tall brush beyond the beach moved slightly. The hunters knew a large animal retreated away from their canoe. They heard the thud of heavy footfalls as the animal in the thicket ran at top speed toward the old growth forest.

"Let's go get our moose," Prairie Fox whispered. *Mitigumi* grabbed his hunting gear and jumped onto the shore. The men had a hunting strategy. They would separate; one going up-wind to herd the moose back down to the waiting other. Prairie Fox planned to go some two hundred meters further up the shoreline and walk inward with enough noise to scare the moose back to *Mitigumi*.

* * * * *

There were no tracks for *Mitigumi* to follow but he heard the snapping of branches as the animal moved ahead of him. There was a sudden silence and *Mitigumi* thought the moose was trying to sight his pursuer. *Mitigumi* stopped. He took an arrow shaft from the two he held ready for rapid shots from his bow. He fitted the arrow notch into the bowstring and drew it back. He dropped to one knee and waited.

* * * * *

Prairie Fox headed inland from the lakeshore; his loaded musket over his shoulder. He stopped and poured powder into a second musket and rammed the lead ball into place. He checked the firing pan and flint. With both guns primed and ready he walked back toward his hunting partner. He saw or heard nothing as he snaked his way through the thick trees.

* * * * *

Mitigumi held his bow drawn and ready for some time. He heard no sound or saw any movement in the wall of willows. He relaxed his bowstring letting the tension in the ash wood bow go slack. A twig snapped behind him but before he could turn something hard and heavy struck the back of his head and he pitched forward. Moments later, *Mitigumi* regained his senses. He was carried on the hairy back of some animal that sped through the brush. The creature that carried him was large enough to snap off branches and small limbs as it charged through the trees.

* * * * *

Prairie Fox heard the sounds of thudding feet running somewhere directly ahead. The thudding sounds came nearer. He stopped. He turned sharply and headed at an angle to his right, hoping to intercept the moose as it ran toward him.

* * * * *

Red Cedar had beached his canoe and sat on a fallen log trying to figure out the reason he had failed to spot any sign of moose. Not only were the moose hiding from his gun, there were no deer, no squirrels, not even a sign of rabbit droppings which should be seen everywhere. Something had chased away all the game. There were no animal tracks to be seen. There was no evidence of other hunters having been in the region.

“What could have caused this?” He asked himself. At this instant, he heard the scream; a long drawn out scream of fear and pain that was abruptly silenced.

* * * * *

Prairie Fox stopped; frozen in his tracks by the scream which echoed in the forest. It was a man’s scream; a heart rending sound. He pushed his way through the brush toward the direction of the scream.

* * * * *

Mitigumi could not scream again. The creature held him high above the ground. His clawed man-like hand strangling the man. The hunter’s eyes bulged in fear and from the pressure the beast applied to his throat. The creature turned his great head from side to side as he studied the man he held aloft by one of his giant hands. *Mitigumi* saw his dull unfeeling eyes study him. The huge man-thing began to croon a soft high-pitched whine. The beast salivated and drool ran down his dark leathery face into the mat of gray hair on his chest. He opened his mouth in a wide yawn and four great pointed teeth, yellowed and stained flashed before *Mitigumi*’s clouding eyes. The hunter lost control of his body in his terror and hot urine scalded his thigh. The monstrous creature tore a strip of tree moss from a branch with his free arm. *Mitigumi* was losing consciousness. He felt the creature pry his mouth open. The moss was forced into his mouth and deep down into the back of his throat. The man tried to scream but could not. The choking moss stifled any sound. The creature began to whine and croon. The sound began low and rose to a high whistling. It was a sound that went deep into *Mitigumi*’s dying brain.

* * * * *

Red Cedar was tense with apprehension. The scream had come from directly across the lake. The old hunter strained hoping to pinpoint the exact direction of the sound. A silence far more frightening than the scream filled his ears. In the midst of the silence a sound began; a high-pitched keening that rose and fell in a quavering wail. Red Cedar jumped to his feet. He stood in tense awareness,

every sense alert. He turned his head from side to side, sniffing the air. He took the air into his nostrils in quick sharp breaths. As he tested the air, he turned in a tight circle. A gust of wind scudded across the lake from the western shore carrying the scent of something wild and unknown to the old man's nostrils. This was not the scent of any animal. He knew the scents of all in this region. This was a smell that brought confusion. He searched his mind for an answer and the one that came to him caused his legs to weaken. The old hunter dropped to his knees on the sand at the water's edge. For the first time in many seasons, Red Cedar knew terror.

* * * * *

Prairie Fox pushed on through the mass of alder and tangled trees. He listened for sounds to guide him to the source of the scream. He heard a crooning in the distance. It had the pitch and tone of whistling. He moved down a slope into a small ravine where the mist hung in a thin gray layer. He took in a deep breath to ease the tension in his body and went rigid with fright. The smell of something decayed and ancient and yet animal like hung in the thick air of the ravine. Prairie Fox ran from the ravine. He reached the opposite ridge. He could not explain the brief jolt of fear the terrible odor had brought.

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Mitigumi slipped into dark dreams. He thought a voice spoke his name. He was lifted into the air and cradled against a huge body that smelled like rotted wood. A great arm held him fast. His head was forced backward. The last sound *Mitigumi* heard in his dream was the crack of his own neck breaking.

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Red Cedar stood up from the wet sand and lifted his eyes to the sky. He stretched out his arms and called out to *Kitchi Manitou* to protect and save the hunting party. He asked the Creator Spirit to give him courage. He would try to aid the hunters on the west shore. He knew what evil they had encountered but would not think or speak its

name. The old man paddled toward the other shore. In the middle of the lake Red Cedar stopped paddling. He tested the air. The acrid, dead-animal-odor lingered in the misty eddies of fog that swirled over the lake. He paddled with more purpose and prayed harder than before.

* * * * *

Prairie Fox cocked the firing piece of his musket and held it at waist level. He advanced like a frightened warrior in his first battle. The stench grew stronger. The very hair on his head seemed to stand and the hairs at the nape of his neck crawled. As the odor grew in strength, so did his fear. He struggled against even thinking the creature's name. He looked around with extreme caution. Again, he checked the musket and blew on the pan to make sure the gunpowder was dry; he checked the placement of the flint. Prairie Fox bent forward in order to pull the big knife from the sheath at his back and noticed the first drops of blood. He looked around for more. There was not a clear blood trail just a drop or two low on the pine scrub here; another drop on the dry needles of the forest floor ahead. The blood-trail led him toward a thick cluster of jack pine.

He pushed through the thick branches into a clearing. The sight was so horrifying the blood drained from his brain and he staggered; almost falling to the ground. He dropped his musket and grabbed for a tree branch as he fought to remain lucid. Prairie Fox tried to quell the nausea that rose in his throat. He forced himself to look. *Mitigumi's*, body, stripped of clothing, hung upside down by the heels, his head hung at a grotesque angle. The man's body cavity had been ripped open and cleaned. He was strung up like a moose kill ready for butchering. Prairie Fox turned away and leaned against the trunk of the tree. His vomit spewed over the leaves of the low bushes.

Prairie Fox did not see or hear the hulking creature that clubbed him senseless with its great fist. He did not feel the wrenching twist that broke his neck. The grey beast crouched low and sniffed at its latest kill. The long-clawed hands of the man-thing began to tear at the buckskin clothing of its prey. As it tore the clothing away, the creature crooned. The sound the beast made was a high quavering

tone that rose and fell in pitch. The beast's song resembled the call of a solitary loon.

* * * * *

The old man, Red Cedar was still forty canoe lengths from the western shore of the lake when he heard the quavering sound again. There was no mistaking it. It was not the cry of a loon. It was the voice of the *Wendigo*. The old hunter searched his mind for something that would keep the *Wendigo* at bay. That something was fire. Fire would intimidate the creature. He turned the canoe toward a small round island; really the top of a drowned hillock. The rising lake water had isolated the island from the mainland.

Red Cedar knew he was safe surrounded by deep water. He paddled to the island and cut green alder saplings. He lashed them to the canoe prow with bark twine he made from a basswood tree capping the tiny island. In minutes, he had created a small square platform formed to protrude the length of his arm from the front of the canoe. A wide band of white birch bark was hurriedly fashioned into a flat tray filled with beach sand and set on the platform. Another wide piece of very white birch bark was tied flat and upright on the alder poles behind the sand filled tray. The old hunter worked quickly to gather more birch bark and all the flammable materials he could find. After mounding a pile of kindling in the center of the sand filled tray he sprinkled gunpowder over it. Red Cedar filled the front of the canoe with all the small twigs and dry bits of wood he could find. This done he pushed the canoe from where he had beached it into the dark water and paddled again toward the western shore, taking care to always stay over deep water.

The sun was in the west when Red Cedar saw the ruined canoe. He recognized it as one of his own small craft; one he loaned to *Mitigumi* and Prairie Fox. Only the prow protruded above the water. He saw the long gashes opened the canoe's sides. The stern hung under the surface. He could see large rocks helped to sink the craft. Red Cedar looked on shore and saw the back packs of the two hunters. The carrying baskets were crushed and torn. Pieces of clothing and gear were strewn around the beach. He back-paddled

away. He continued down the shoreline always keeping to deep water where the creature could not wade out to attack him. As he approached the tip of a small peninsula he saw a grey shadow streaking through the willows and alders that lined the shore. The shadow followed his every move and moved parallel to the canoe along the beach. About four canoe lengths ahead, the man saw the colour of the lake change and knew that he was approaching shallow water. He stroked hard with his paddle to the left side of his craft and turned the canoe sharply over deep water. As he did, a large rock flew over his head and splashed into the lake near the canoe. He looked back at the point of land where the clumps of willows ended and saw the beast. The horror was sitting on the point that jutted out into the lake. It squatted on its haunches; matted gray hair covered strong arms that ended in long clawed fingers. The huge beast wrapped its arms around its knees and rocked back and forth. The creature began whistling a wavering call. The wailing sounds the creature produced changed now into a soft crooning almost like a woman's lullaby. Red Cedar felt drawn to the sand spit where the beast sat calling to him. He placed his paddle across his lap and the canoe began to drift toward the monster on the shore. Red Cedar's canoe drifted closer. He was mesmerized by the song of the beast. The creature stood up when the canoe with its lone paddler drifted closer to the point of land. The sharp odor of the beast brought Red Cedar's mind back to him and he realized he was in danger. He back-paddled with all the speed and strength he could muster. In his haste and his frantic paddling and shifting of his weight, the canoe rocked and nearly tipped. He watched his musket slip over the side and sink into the depths.

The creature was infuriated when the rocking canoe lurched back away from shore. It screamed a high shrieking noise that ended with a series of rasping barks. The beast waded thigh deep into the water chasing after the canoe. Unable to swim and afraid to go into deeper water, the hairy giant lumbered back to shore and continued screaming at the man in the canoe. Its open mouth showed huge teeth that resembled those of a bear. Red Cedar knew that his hunting companions had perished: killed by the brute on the shore. He turned the canoe to the middle of the lake and down toward the river mouth

where he could attempt an escape. The beast followed the man's progress down the lake, running and shrieking along the shore as Red Cedar evaded him. The man-like creature continued pursuit, sometimes throwing large rocks and branches at the canoe when the lake narrowed and Red Cedar was forced closer to the shore and the horrible man-thing waiting there.

The daylight was almost gone. If darkness came before he reached the mouth of the river the beast might overtake him. With the dark of night, Red Cedar stood little chance of escaping. In the brief moment of twilight, Red Cedar pulled his fire making tools from the pouch on his belt. He let the canoe drift and reached forward for some dry tinder. He shredded the bark into a fine stringy mass and placed it on a scrap of birch bark.

He struck the flint against the steel. The sulfur smell from the blue sparks filled his nostrils. He was not successful with the fire tools. The tinder would not take fire.

The night came down. The frightened man stuck the flint against the steel again and again. His canoe was drifting with the current but to where? The wild, foul smell grew stronger and he struck the fire tools again; the tinder caught the sparks. Red Cedar moved forward in the canoe. Shielding his face with his left forearm, he dropped the flaming tinder onto the gunpowder and mound of twigs on the platform. There was an instant flash as the gunpowder flared and ignited the twigs.

The creature screamed. The flames, reflected forward by the white birch bark square behind them, lit the shoreline in a bright glow. Illuminated in the reflected light stood the creature hip deep in the water, not two canoe lengths away. Red Cedar watched the shrieking brute stumbled backward in the shallow water, confused by this unknown light.

It held its arm up to shield eyes that glowed green in the reflected flames. The beast took to the brush shrieking and screaming in fright but also in fury; its prey had escaped.

Red Cedar turned sharply to the left and paddled into the mouth of the river. He was able to see up river for some distance with the aid of the reflector fire that he kept blazing until the sun rose and

bleached the sky to a faded grey. He knew he would reach base camp at *Wabuskawin* Lake when the sun stood directly overhead.

* * * * *

The hunt leader thought of the unhappy task that he faced when reached the camp. His sister's daughter, The-Otter-Who-Dances must not know the manner in which Prairie Fox and his hunting partner met their deaths. He decided to tell his niece that her man and *Mitigumi* had gone into the lake when rough water capsized their canoe. He would tell Otter-Who-Dances he was too far away on the eastern shore to save them. He hoped she would accept his story. The old man increased the speed of his paddle's strokes and came in sight of the camp. He saw the smoke from the many fires the boy had kept burning. He saw a robed figure sitting on the gravel of the lakeshore. He paddled closer; it was the Cree, *Sikos*. The man sat staring up-river. Red Cedar beached his canoe and hurried to his friend who sat motionless. The man's eyes were open but he saw nothing of this world. He sat rigid and stiff with the cold touch of death upon his body. Red Cedar heard the sound of running feet on gravel. It was the young boy. He had expected his niece.

"He cannot speak now that he has died. Before, he spoke strange words for two settings of the sun," the boy explained. "Yesterday, a little time before dawn, I heard him scream. Otter-Who-Dances heard it, too. The one who screamed was the Cree who sat where you find him now."

"What happened after that?" Asked Red Cedar. They moved away from the Cree's body, the boy continued.

"Otter-Who-Dances said he was in a trance and we should help him to sit up, so we did. We wrapped him in his robe and hurried away and stayed away until the setting of the sun. He did not speak or move after that. We did not know he would die during the night."

"Where is my sister's daughter?" The hunt leader asked.

The boy's eyes filled with tears and he began to sob quietly. He covered his face with his hand and dropped his chin to his chest, pointing in the direction of the woman's shelter.

“You will be sad when you see her,” The boy sobbed. “I could not stop her.”

Red Cedar ran to the brush shelter of his niece. He was not prepared for the unhappy sight that met his eyes. Otter-Who-Dances’ eyes were swollen and red from weeping but wide open and staring. Red Cedar knelt and took her hand. When he spoke she did not look at him. She spoke so quietly Red Cedar leaned closer to hear her words.

“I am a widow, my Uncle. Prairie Fox is dead. The Weasel told me. That Cree man had a vision. Prairie Fox is gone to the western land of shadows. I am alone.”

Red Cedar moved to sit beside her. He spoke words of comfort but when he spoke them he knew she was not ready to be comforted.

“It is true. Prairie Fox is gone from us and his hunting partner is gone also...” he paused and told his false tale, “The rough water overturned their canoe and they went under. I was far away and...” The woman at his side moaned softly. She held up her hand as a sign for him to stop talking.

Otter-Who-Dances spoke out quietly. “These words you say to me cannot be the truth. I know what happened. The Weasel saw it and revealed it to me before he died of fright. It was not the water of the lake that took him from me it was the beast; the creature the old ones called the *Wendigo*.”

“Do not speak the name, my niece, to do so is to call the creature.”

The woman turned to her Uncle. A weary smile was on her lips. “It is too late, for I have said the name many times since The Weasel shared his vision with me.”

She let out a gasping sob and threw back the robe that covered her head and shoulders. Red Cedar saw the cuts she had made on her arms in her grief. He saw the remains of her long hair. The hair Prairie Fox had loved was hacked away leaving clumps that were singed and burned with the ashes she had heaped upon her head in sorrow.

“Dear child, grieve now, but tomorrow I will take you back to the camp of our clan and your relatives will comfort and heal you spirit and your heart.”

The Otter-Who-Dances only nodded and did not speak. The Uncle left the young woman, and went to find the boy. He told youngster they would leave in the morning after placing the dead Cree high in a tree. They would take the grieving widow back to their own land.

* * * * *

The dark enveloped the camp and through the night the boy and the old man kept the fires blazing as brightly as they could, feeding branch after branch into the flames until exhaustion overtook them and they slept.

* * * * *

Far up the river where it emptied into the dark waters of *Lac Bete Grisse*, the creature hunched down into the gravel of the shore and waited. It crooned its song to the night stars; listening to the echo of its own voice. The group of four in the camp at Rabbit Skin Lake slept deeply but one of them heard the voice of the *Wendigo*.

* * * * *

At dawn Red Cedar woke up with the sound of spruce jays squabbling. He walked to the shelter of the boy and shook him awake.

“I go to speak with my niece. Go pack the canoe.” Red Cedar crossed to the shelter of his niece and found it empty. He thought she must have gone to the lakeshore to wash. He looked in that direction and saw no one. He felt fear in his heart and ran to calling out her name. There was no answer; no sound but the wash of the lake and the squawking of the jays. He ran to the lake and saw that his small canoe was missing. Only the big canoe of Prairie Fox was on the beach. Sorrow mixed with fear entered his heart and he called out to the river...

“*Nigig-Namid!*”

* * * * *

Otter-Who-Dances did not hear his call. She was far down the river now. Just before the night ended she took her clothing and the bundle of things Prairie Fox had left behind and went quietly to the water. She turned the canoe with the turtle crest upright and tossed the bundles inside. Stepped into the bark craft and began to paddle down the river toward *Lac Bete Grisse*. Just after the rising of the sun she reached the mouth of the river where it disappeared into the deep water of the lost lake. She smelled the odor of the wild things and heard a soft crooning sound. It was the same quavering voice she heard in her dream. The crooning began again. It came from willows to her left. Otter-Who-Dances switched her paddle to the right side of the canoe and pulled the water. The canoe turned and she paddled toward the wall of willows ahead.

* * * * *

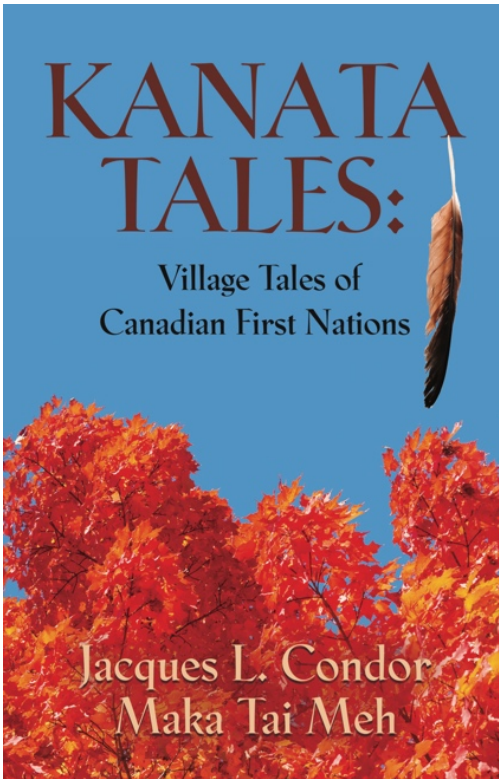
“Red Cedar,” the boy shouted. “Your canoe must have drifted away. I have searched but cannot find it.” Red Cedar did not answer the boy. He looked up river and let the tears fill his eyes. The boy touched the old man’s arm to ask a question.

“She is dead,” Red Cedar said. “I know the name of the evil thing that brought death to her, but I will not speak its name.”

The boy gasped, “You speak of *her*. You mean Otter-Who-Dances? How can she be dead?”

Red Cedar wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his capote and said, “My niece took the small canoe up the river and called out to the creature. The beast came to claim her.” The boy sobbed and moaned. Red Cedar pulled him to his chest and wrapped his arms about the boy’s narrow shoulders. He held the youth for several moments and then released him.

“Come, we leave this place forever.”



The collected stories in this book represent fifty years of visiting indigenous, autochthones, and First Nations people in Canada. Relatives, elders, and tribal story tellers gave me these stories, which I offer back to Canadian and American readers of Native American fiction to honor my heritage and culture.

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VILLAGE TALES OF CANADIAN FIRST NATIONS**
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