

The Raid

Summer, 1588

From "Windigo Moon," by Robert Downes

While picking berries with her sister-wives in a glade east of the village, the girl from the north country fell into a dream of revenge.

Ashagi savored what she would do to her husband, Kesamna-ista, if the chance arose. Just before dawn, she would lift the nutting stone and hammer old Snail Eye's brains out as he lay snoring in the lodge; mash them like a woman pounded squash while he kicked his life away.

But what then? She would run and her sister-wives would wake screaming. And then old Saya'hupahu would demand that she be put to the slow fire. As the chief's first wife, that would be Red Bird's right, for Ashagi was nothing but a captive and a slave.

As she picked, thoughts of her mother and father arose in her mind and drifted away like clouds before she could grasp them. Again she remembered how her family lay trembling in their lodge in the chill darkness before dawn when the dogs had begun howling outside, their voices intermingled with the cries of the Dakota and a wailing baby.

The enemy had come running from the gray mantle of the forest like ghosts gliding through the morning fog.

Their village had been on the river below the Gakaabikaa falls, not far from the north shore of Kitchi Gami. Once, it was said, a chief's daughter had beguiled a war party over these falls, which were taller than two pines stacked end-to-end. The girl had died saving her people, but there would be no saving this time.

There had been no time to react. As was custom, her grandfather and decrepit uncle slept nearest the lodge door as the first to defend against attackers. She heard them crushed beneath the weight of a flaming log hurled through the doorway as the warriors poured in, tripping over their flailing bodies in the mists of dawn filtering through the opening. Her brothers had been speared and clubbed straightaway by the wrestling tumult of warriors, and then her father rose up; he had fought like a wildcat with only a fletching stone for a weapon, struggling to sing his death song amid his gasps and sobs.

Even amid the soot and embers of the fire kicked up in the lodge - through all the screams, grunts and wild yells - the flailing limbs and bodies tangled

like the shadows of demons in the darkness - even so, she saw her father deliver a death blow to a towering Dakota whose club caught on a lodgepole. Then her brave, loving father had gashed the leg of a stripling before going down under a storm of blows.

As for her mother, the clouds revealed nothing but a vision of what Ashagi had been told of her fate. On the long march of captivity her sister-cousin had whispered that her mother had clawed her way beneath the bark wall of the lodge and was last seen running for the river with three men chasing her. Laughing and chasing, with her mother never to be seen again.

"She was too old to keep," her cousin said.

Theirs was an old village. It had been settled four generations ago when the Northern Ojibwe split off from their cousins who lived on the southern shore of Kitchi Gami. There had not been an attack on the village in more than 20 summers, longer than most had been alive.

Carefree of their defenses, the people of Ashagi's clan had lived so long in peace and security that they had lost the warlike ways of their southern cousins, who called them waub-ose, or rabbits.

Yet now the waub-ose were in the teeth of the wolves.

Long after, Ashagi remembered nothing but the legs of men crowding around her as she buried her head in her knees outside the lodge. The hard-muscled legs of young men, greased red and black with paint, the colors of human life and death. And she, thin as a willow, barely a woman. All her life, she would see the forest of their legs crowding forward in her dreams, unable or unwilling to remember what came after she had been tossed and tumbled among them. She remembered that there had been screams then, but they remained silent in her dreams forever after.

Afterward, the women and children had been hustled into the long house at the heart of the village and did not see the dismemberment of their men. But through the walls they heard the chop of stone axes against meat and the cracking of joints. They heard the groans of those being butchered and knew the voices among them. Their men called to them, cursed the enemy, and sang their death songs.

All this amid the screams of exultation from those who did the killing.

It was well known that a man without eyes or a head could not find his way in the spirit land; nor could a man without limbs hunt the shades of its ghostly animals. A man whose eardrums had been pierced with a sharpened bone could not hear his dead brothers calling from the shadows. A man cleft of his penis would never enjoy the maidens who waited in the afterlife. And

what was a man in the spirit land if the hair had been torn from atop his head? All of these blessings were taken by the enemy.

Above all, the Dakota knew that a man who was dismembered upon his death, with his bones scattered and eaten by animals, could not wreak vengeance upon his killers when they met again in the afterlife.

When the women emerged from the great house the next morning, squinting in the sun, they found the village littered with limbs, heads, feet and hands, with eyes staring blindly up from the ground. This, and the smell of blood mixed with feces where men had watched as their intestines had been torn from their bodies. All this in a storm of flies and sniffing dogs, with the enemy calmly looking on, smoking their pipes.

Then the village had been fired, and the wail of the women rose in pitch until it outdid the crackling flames in its anguish. The long houses, which had cradled so many families, built with love through the effort of so many hands over many years; their walls caved inward and fell to the flames. The great lodge of the chieftains, which had hosted so many honored guests, traders and shamans; burned to the ground. All of the wigwams and storehouses followed; all sacrificed to the fire. Why? Why? The question was on the lips of every woman and child and burned in their eyes as they watched their homes dwindle to ashes.

The Dakota were at their leisure marching south from the village, not bothering to tie their captives on the second day. And who could escape, and where? When the line of women and children stopped for the night, Ashagi counted more than 200 warriors on her fingers and toes, drawing a line in the dirt each time she reached 20. The raiders were five times that of the men of her village. What had they to fear when every man and boy had been slaughtered?

Some had left their war clubs behind, graven with their totems, so that all would know who killed the last of the Heron clan.

The outrages against the women and children had stopped by the second day, but they were taunted with the scalps of their fathers, uncles, brothers and sons, which were dangled from spears before their wailing faces as they struggled along.

From time to time, the women whispered amongst themselves, "They are ab-boin-ug, ab-boin-ug!" for roasters was the name the Ojibwe had given the Dakota for their habit of charring their captives alive.

But the braves leered in close and whispered their own accusations, claiming that it was the Ojibwe were better known for roasting their enemies until their flesh puckered.

"Naduesiu," Ashagi whispered back to them under her breath. For "little snakes" is also what the Ojibwe called the Dakota and their enemies to the south, the Haudenosaunee. Sometimes they were simply called the Siu.

Ashagi's own people sometimes called themselves "the people who draw pictures," the ozhibii'we, after the pictographs they made on birch scrolls and the stone shoulders of the earth. But the Ojibwe's everyday name was the Anishinaabek, for like every tribe under the sun they considered themselves the True People, the Original People.

Frightened as she was, Ashagi did not believe that the enemy would roast her in turn, for like all young women, she knew her value to men. There was a reason the Dakota had spared only the nubile women and children of the village, and it not for greasing their fires.

Her own sister, Bapakine, Grasshopper, had been stolen from the Dakotas five summers ago. While leading a band of hunters, her father had found her gathering firewood along a river near her village and had taken her from the enemy to be raised as an adopted child. Bapakine had taught Ashagi a smattering of words in the Dakota's language. It had all been just a game then, but now Ashagi grappled to remember. Each word had grown precious as she strove to grasp the babble of her captors. She gazed back and forth among them as if she were a dog, with no greater sense of comprehension.

"Where are they taking us?" she asked a cousin as they struggled along.

Her cousin was old enough to recall the long ago raiding days before the long peace with the Dakota. She had kept her life by claiming to be a medicine woman when the enemy had come for her.

"West, far west," she answered, "to the land of the Dakotas."

"For what purpose?" Ashagi asked, though she knew it well enough.

Her cousin looked up and laughed, her tearing eyes as bright as wet cherries.

"For what purpose?" Daughter, for all I know, they mean to eat us!" she cried, her voice rising to a shriek.

Some of the captives could not stop sobbing as they pushed along the trail. A child who would not stop screaming was sent to the shadow lands with an axe blow to the top of her head and tossed to the side of the line.

For herself, Ashagi felt as if she was floating through a dream of horror, with the frightened faces of her mother and father looming before her as she walked. Her body shook as if in a violent fever and when she spoke the words trembled on her lips and fell to pieces.

She willed herself to think of her mother singing lullabies in their wigwam at winter camp, and of her father's teasing. "Sing little bird, sing," he would say, stroking her hair as they lay before the fire. Little bird was all that anyone in her band had ever called her, a child's name, and in her delight she had never taken the name of a grown woman, even though she was 16 summers old and well-favored in her band for marriage.

Her family had been snug as a nest of wrens, singing and drumming in their lodge through the long, cold nights. Their only enemy then had been the merciless cold, easily defeated by the stories told by her father and grandmother before the winter fire.

One night, she remembered, the snow had fallen in millions of tufts, floating as soft and silent through the trees as the downy feathers of a swan. "Why do the snowflakes gather as they fall?" she had asked, marveling at the sight of the feathering snow.

"Even the snow has a family, child," her father had murmured. "All things have a family, even as we. We are all one clan in the eyes of the Great Spirit; the earth, the sky, the animals and birds; we are all family."

Eya, and on that night Ashagi had thought of the family that she too would bring from her body when the time came for her to become a mother.

Ashagi had been promised a life as fixed and unchanging as the stars rolling through the sky through all the years beyond count. A life that had been handed down from all her grandmothers going back as many generations as there were stones on the beach. Someday soon, the promise said, her eyes would lock on those of a man from several clans away, perhaps at the summer festival held far down the lake. He would be handsome, with flashing eyes and a broad smile, and one day he would appear at her mother's lodge with a deer slung over his shoulder along with earnest words and tobacco for her father. Her father would say no, but the young hunter would come again and again, each time with more deer, elk, moose, whatever it took to prove that he could provide. And, in time, after his little bird gave her assent, her father would say yes, and the man would come to live with them as her husband and as her father's new son.

Then, with the Great Spirit willing, she would become a mother, then a grandmother, then merely a whisper in the memory of her clan as her daughters and their daughters carried on. That was the promise given by the creator of all things, eternal and unchanging among the Anishinaabek.

But now, all was lost - her mother, father, grandmother, brothers -- her home, her village, her flirting beaux - all lost. Only her frail name was left to

remind her of what could never be again. Her chest ached as if it would burst.

On the second night away from the village as she huddled close among the women lying without robes and shivering by the shore of Kitchi Gami, she had a vision as to what her true name should be.

Far down the shore she saw a heron silhouetted against the silver of the lake in the moonlight, standing as still as a tree in the shallows beneath the curtain of the night.

Bird, how did you come to be so far from your nest in the moonlight? she wondered. Bird, you are lost like me.

As if it had heard her thoughts, the heron came bobbing slowly toward her on its awkward stilts, its claws scratching at the stones by the water's edge, until at last it was close enough for her to catch the gleam of its amber eye reflected in the moonlight. It fixed on her and gave a mournful honk, then lifted light as a downy feather with its wings translucent beneath the moon.

Lying there, shaking in the damp air, it came to her that the bird had come strutting slowly in the night to choose her. It was a spirit come to guide her, of that she was sure. She would honor her father and her lost clan with its name, a grown woman's name, Ozhaawashko-ashagi, Blue Heron.

The next day, Ashagi saw the men appraising her and the other women as they walked. The boy her father had wounded argued several times with a pot-bellied old man, gesturing in her direction. She hissed at them and the young one laughed, while the old man gaped with a face like a mole. One of his eyes had the pearly sheen of a clam shell's inner rim.

The captives were given nothing to eat for the first two days of the march. Only when the children began to beg to the point of irritation were they given handfuls of wild rice taken from their village along with unsweetened wild oats, the sustenance of the Dakota when game was scarce. But that was not often, for the Dakota lived far beyond a maze of marshes and lakes beyond count where elk, buffalo and beaver were said to be as plentiful as the pebbles in a stream.

That night, her grandmother Nookomis came calling in Ashagi's dreams, rustling like an autumn leaf in the wind. She remembered grandmother beseeching her to be strong as she had been led from the village by the enemy, bound by the neck with a rough cord of elm bark.

Her grandmother had thin braids of gray on either side of her hazelnut face, which was lined with the rivers of winters beyond count. Her dark eyes were filled with tears of longing as the throng of captives was led west, for only

Nookomis was left alive by the Dakota to remain in the village as witness to what they had done; left to die of loneliness if no one came.

"_____ him!" Nookomis said in Ashagi's dream. "_____ him!" But she could not make out the words.

On the third day they piled into the Dakota's waiting canoes and set out south along the shore of Kitchi Gami. For three days they bobbed along the lakeshore, enduring the sick feeling that comes from being jerked like a child's toy in the waves. Then came a succession of rivers and lakes with endless portages and the women put to work hauling the canoes and gear of their captors. They were filthy with sweat by nightfall, for some of the portages were half a day's walk or more and the Dakota demanded that they carry the fragile canoes on their shoulders. Often, Ashagi slipped and fell beneath the load, once almost breaking her knee on a jagged stone. Soon, her moccasins were worn to nothing and her bare feet were painted with blood and mud. Yet no one dared linger, for the warriors were impatient with their spears, thrusting the weary forward with cries in their strange, buttery language.

By the new moon they reached a country where the trees began to dwindle as families of elk and woodland bison crossed their trail. Ashagi sensed a change in the air; the sweetwater scent of Kitchi Gami and home was long behind her.

One evening the women found the Dakota men buzzing among themselves with excitement. A hasty dance was organized around the fire that night, attended by many trilling cries of triumph as the warriors flickered before the blaze.

That morning, Ashagi awoke to find the Dakota busy painting themselves as if for battle; they had slathered their bodies with swaths of greasy red ochre and charcoal, with rings of white and green encircling their eyes or drawn in lightning bolts over their faces.

"See how they primp their hair? They are dressing for another raid," she said to Bapakine.

"And then what's to become of us if they lose?" she said as an afterthought.

"No, sister," Bapakine replied, "they are only coming home."

By the noonday sun the dancing tumult of painted warriors drove the captives to a shallow ford along a broad river where they were met by a multitude of thousands. Amid cheers that resounded as a roar along the riverbank, the warriors dashed forward, screaming their delight in the homecoming and waving the scalps of the vanquished before them as they danced across the water.

There, spread along the river, was a sight beyond the imagination of the Anishinaabek of the far north. Ashagi was astounded by the size of the village; hundreds of lodges ran down the river far out of sight, its pathways crowded with barking dogs and howling children.

To the wonder of the captives, many of the lodges were constructed of the earth itself, piled thick and high on every side over a network of branches and topped by beamed roofs covered with bark. At one end of the village Ashagi noticed several lodges constructed over a patchwork of skins overlapping a network of poles. Like arrowheads they were, pointing to the sky. Bapakine said they were called tipis.

"How can so many people live in one place?" Ashagi wondered.

"This is just a summer camp," Bapakine answered. "My true father brought me here as a child. The clans have gathered to trade and visit. They will move on once the raid is celebrated."

Ashagi wondered what her own part would be in the celebration, but was afraid to ask.

As if guessing her thoughts, Bapakine laughed.

"Don't worry, sister. You are as nothing to them. They will no more harm you than your father harmed me when he found me by the river."

Just outside the encampment, a bitch in heat was yelping and leaping sideways back and forth in the dust. Leaping at her heels was a yipping pack, howling and panting, their peckers wet and red with anticipation. A yellow male with a spotted eye latched on and the bitch screamed as they locked together and twisted in the dust. Ashagi knew it would be a sleepless night for those lodged within earshot of the pack, for the dogs would bark and howl until the sun rose unless they were driven off with a shower of stones.

Will it be thus for me? she wondered. She felt unsettled despite Bapakine's assurance.

She remembered grandmother Nookomis telling her to be wary of men, for her pretty face and jutting hips would bring them sniffing. Men, grandmother said, were wolves. They hunted as wolves in a pack. They preyed as wolves on the weak. They turned on each other and on the old and disabled when it was to their advantage. They turned on their leaders as well. They killed as wolves simply for the pleasure of killing. And when they were needed most, they often turned and ran.

The men around her growled as they challenged each other. They tested and pushed. They edged into the space of others with an aura of menace, seeking weakness. Bigger men loomed over smaller men and smaller men

snarled with the threat of stabbing upwards. They nosed at each other, offering smiles that concealed fangs, locking eyes in an endless struggle of domination.

And yet the wolves loved each other and needed each other and could not survive without their pack, for a lone wolf soon dies of hunger and fear. And so there were times when the wolves of men would even die for each other.

This is why men slept together on their side of the lodges, and women on the other with the twain never meeting under the gaze of others. And why men slept in body piles in a tangle of limbs on the hunt to keep warm, their hands jerking each others' cocks for the sport of it. And why they shared out every scrap of food, no matter who made the kill.

And why sometimes, they were as wolves to their women.

"Though a wolf mates for life, still, like a man, he is never faithful in his heart, always looking for another bitch," Nookomis had said glumly on a long-ago evening by the fire. "A wolf is a pretty thing, but you must always remember that it bites."

Grandmother knew, for her own long-dead husband had been a wolf disguised as man who had treated her just so.

If grandmother felt that way about the men of their own people, what would she say of the Dakota? Ashagi had never felt more like a rabbit, quaking as the sound of drums grew louder with every step.

Word of their arrival had spread in advance and a great cry went up from the women, children and elders of the camp who rushed to greet the returning warriors. As they pushed up from the river, hundreds of the Dakota women and children gathered at either side of the captives, throwing rocks, dog shit and chunks of smoldering firewood as the column pushed forward. Those few whose men had not returned from the raid turned on them in a fury.

Soon, they were shuffling through a cloudburst of missiles and blows, pushing forward in a herd with their arms cradling their heads for protection. A woman went down and the Dakota rushed forward with cries of glee, beating her until her sister-cousins dragged her back to the protection of their arms. Eya, and some of them seized the clubs and stones from their foes and swung back, showing their teeth and screaming their defiance as their children hid behind them. The mob roiled like a ranting beast with a thousand arms as the sisters of the Anishinaabek pushed their way up from the river. Soon, it was as if they were being crushed by hundreds of jeering faces on either side.

"They mean to kill us all!" Ashagi screamed above the tumult.

"They are only testing us, sister, to see if we are strong enough to join them as their adopted kin!" Bapakine shouted. "Stand tall and walk on as if you were lord of the Great Turtle Island itself."

Eya, and Ashagi took a blow to the head from a length of firewood, which raised splinters along her cheek. She turned and spat her rage, lunging with her fingernails at the nearest face of the tormenters. This, of course, produced only laughter and a shower of more filth and stones, for Ashagi's beauty marked her as a target for a humbling.

At last, the Anishinaabek women and their children gathered in a space between several lodges, which afforded some protection against their tormenters. They sat down as one, huddled in a stony hostility as the Dakota drifted away.

For two days and a night the victory dance carried on in a great clearing at the center of the camp through the thunder of drums and feasting. First, the war chief, whom Ashagi came to know as Hiahaa-sapa, Black Owl, performed his pantomime of how he had devised the plan of attack and how he was first among warriors into the village of the Ojibwe, striking again and again.

Painted black from head to toe and covered in a cloak of eagle feathers which fanned out like wings behind him, Hiahaa-sapa's dance was long and repetitious, but each time he sallied again through his vision of the Ojibwe village with his club raised high, the drums of the Dakota thundered faster and louder, raising every heartbeat and cries of admiration as every member of the encampment leapt to their feet to dance with him.

And then, amid a great cloud of dust so dense that Ashagi could barely see, every warrior in the war party danced his part as well, one at a time, all through the night and the next day with the drums never ceasing. Gazing from beyond the ring of their captors the women of the Anishinaabek huddled for comfort among themselves, almost forgotten.

Two days later, after the village had collapsed in exhaustion, Ashagi was parted from her sisters after much squabbling among the Dakota. She was roused from sleep in the corral of captives and taken by the pot-bellied old man with the slack face and the dead eye that she had seen gazing at her on the march.

By nightfall she learned that her new master's name was Snail Eye, Kesamna-ista, and that she was doomed to join his lodge as his third wife.