

The Chief

Slush sprayed about as the boy pedaled along the side of the road. His father had attached fenders and the boy wore boots and snow bibs and remained dry. If his progress was any faster, he would have to contend with the cold air making his eyes water, but he was untroubled by his pace. His beanie pulled low and coat zipped high, he buried his chin deep and peered through the narrow gap across a frozen field. Only a slight difference in tone separated snow-covered dirt from an overcast sky. A row of pines on the opposite side of the road shielded him from a crosswind, affording the luxury of curiosity.

He spotted four deer bedded down in the pines just ten yards from the road. He stopped and straddled his bike and watched them, but they only stared back. In his coat pocket was a sandwich bag full of crackers that his mother had given him and he wondered whether deer liked crackers, but decided against throwing some for fear of scaring them away. He pushed off and told them goodbye, looking over his shoulder and seeing them still staring, unbothered.

Further along the road, the boy passed an old cemetery. He had recently watched the cemetery pass by through the car window and asked his parents whether their dog, Luna, would be buried there. His father told him no and that only people were buried there, and besides, no one had been buried in that cemetery for many years. The boy asked where, then, would they bury Luna. His mother told him the dog doctor had already taken care of her. What did that mean? Where was she? His father cut in to tell the boy how proud he was of how he had taken the news. He was tough. When they first told him a few days before, his voice quivered when he asked if it was true, then he went back to playing. But without knowing it, every night that he

went to bed and Luna didn't leap up and cover his feet, turmoil grew and circulated while brown fur still clung to his blankets.

Beyond the first few rows of decrepit headstones all askew was a stately obelisk that was even taller than his father. If Luna could be buried in that cemetery, that one would be hers. He would put a statue of her on top of it, one folded ear and all.

He focused on turning his pedals, churning his way through the slush. The row of pines ended and the cold wind bit him the moment he was exposed, making him shrink deeper into his coat. Corn fields were on both sides of the road; the stubs of dead stalks poking through the snow all the way to the tree line. Snow had drifted across the road, leaving blotches of pavement. He turned his head away from the wind and eyed an imposing solitary oak tree in the middle of the field, its branches bare and twisted in every direction in a grotesque pose. Several crows took flight from its grasp and joined the plumes of snow kicked up and dancing across the field.

His destination was at the end of one of the fields. The black gambrel roof of a white barn was all that was visible beneath the thin layer of snow it held on its steepest pitches. His father had volunteered him for a day of sweeping and shoveling at the farm. When the boy asked if he was being punished for something, his father only told him no.

The wind relented as he approached a grove of crabapple trees. In front of them, just on the other side of the ditch, appeared to be a single headstone. He thought nothing of floors and stalls that needed to be swept as he lifted his bicycle over a small snowbank at the edge of the road and left it lying on its side. He trudged into the ditch and at the bottom he sunk into the snow past his knees. When he tried to step out, he lost his left boot. Supported by heavy snow on all sides, he managed to keep his socked foot aloft as he turned in a bulky pirouette and plucked the snow-filled boot from the hole. With a series of short, violent one-legged hops he reached the

opposite slope of the ditch, knocked the snow out of his boot, and pulled it on. His foot was cold but dry as he high-stepped out and toward the headstone.

A small drift of snow covered most of the headstone and he wiped it away.

CHIEF RED SKY

DIED 1851

AGED 63

The boy recognized the word CHIEF from a book he had checked out of his school library and read with the help of his mother. A stern man with a beautiful headdress and necklaces and dressed in buckskins formed in his mind. The year meant nothing to the boy. Why was the chief here all alone? He looked down the road in the direction of the cemetery. Why wasn't he with them? He remembered once passing a cross on the side of the road during the summer and his father explaining roadside memorials. So, he concluded, the chief must have been in a car accident.

He looked about and noticed many deer tracks around the crabapple trees and a procession of tracks leading across the field toward the woods. He stepped out of the grove and into the field. The wind was still. He took a brief look at the black-roofed barn then fixed his eyes on the tree line and plodded on through the snow.

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The chief crouched down for a closer look at the deer tracks. He poked a finger into one, then looked up with his eyes narrowed, surveying the thick forest filled with snow-covered deadfall. He rose and crept along the tracks, deftly avoiding any brush he could see through the snow. Sniffing the air, he only noticed the cold, dry singe in his nostrils. He soon came near the edge of a small clearing where a doe and fawn were picking at a white pine. He lowered himself behind a tree and watched. While he had a clear shot, he did not think of reaching for an arrow. The deer chewed and looked around, their ears reacting to sounds independently from one another and seemingly from the deer themselves. The chief strained to hear what they were hearing, but found only winter silence.

A slight shift in his weight and a squeak of snow underfoot caused all four ears to twitch in his direction. When the chief tried to move for more cover, the two faces turned to him as well. They stared and remained still, save for the occasional slow swing of a jaw filled with pine needles. The chief beheld the doe and its black eyes bulging from the edges of its face, searching them for fear, warmth, or wonder. But they gave him nothing. The doe seemed to him alive in movement alone. It turned its head away from the chief and its body followed, then did the fawn, deeper into the woods.

The chief rose and watched their white tails flick about and vanish. He wiggled the toes of his left foot and noticed they were starting to warm up. Turning in another direction, he picked up a stick, thwacking snow-laden tree limbs as he hiked to watch the accumulation fall.

At the edge of a frozen pond, he searched for tracks leading across the ice for an indication it was safe to cross but found none. He located a rock the size of his fist and threw it as far as he could. It disappeared into the snow atop the ice without a sound. Realizing the flaws in his test, he then dragged a large log to the edge and heaved it. It landed only five feet away. He

put one foot on the ice and slowly transferred all of his weight to it, then brought along the other foot and stood there for a while, gazing about the blank open space and the trees looming around the perimeter. After a cautious second step he lost his nerve and retreated to the shore, apparent merely by a slight incline in the snow. He reasoned his life was too important to his people to take such risks.

As he hiked back toward the field he envisioned himself dragging his kill into his village, his people surrounding him, happy and grateful. They would celebrate him. A chief like himself would be celebrated for many years after he was gone. He would probably have the most important grave in a cemetery with a big monument, far from any roads, surrounded by the graves of those that admired him. He struggled to visualize this and make sense of its existence without him there to see it.

He noticed a mass of fur behind a fallen tree and stopped still. It was dusted with snow and didn't move as he watched for some time. He nocked and aimed an arrow that had materialized, pulling the bowstring taut as he crept closer. As he stepped over the downed tree the motionless object came into full view. It was another doe, laying on its side and stiff with death and frost.

The chief paused and felt a chill of fright but curiosity quickly prevailed. He was tough, he reminded himself. Forgetting the bow and arrow that were supposed to be in his hands, he picked up a stick and stood over the animal. He used the stick to gently prod around its ribs then tried to move one of its rigid, outstretched legs to no avail. He sank to his knees and brought his face close to hers. Her black eyes seemed no different than those he had seen in the clearing, but he saw now a true absence of life. He reached out with his gloved hand and stroked the top of her head and felt an ear, bending it slightly.

A memory suddenly seized his entire body and sent him back on his heels. With heaving breaths, he looked over the stiff deer and focused again on her eyes. He could see that they would be empty forever. He wished he had a blanket to cover her and frantically looked about for something he could give to comfort her—to comfort himself—but only sticks and leaves were poking through the snow. He ran to a pine tree to break off some of its fullest branches, but it was too green, too alive. Returning to the doe, he brushed away some snow from her neck, removed his glove and placed his hand on her brown fur. Watching it beneath his fingers, he began to cry.