

THE PROPHECY

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“**T**ONIGHT I’M GOING TO TELL YOU a very different kind of story. . . . It’s not really a story because it has not yet taken place; but it will take place just as the events in the past have occurred.” Daebaudjimoot paused to fill his pipe. “And even though what I’m about to tell you has not yet come to pass, it is as true as if it has already happened because the auttissookaunuk told me in a dream.”

They, the men, women and children from the neighbouring lodges who had come, waited for Daebaudjimoot to begin. The adults had long ceased to believe the tribal storyteller. Still they came, as they had done so for years, to relive the delight and faith of childhood which moved some of the old to say, “he makes me feel like a child again sitting at my grandparent’s feet.” But unlike the children present who believed Daebaudjimoot, the adults spoke slightly of the storyteller but not without affection. “W’zauaudjimoh” (he exaggerates), they said of him. But there was not a man, woman or child in the village who was not enriched in some way, either in mind or happier in spirit, once having heard Daebaudjimoot.

“Tonight I’m going to tell you about white people.” There was a moment of silence, astounded silence, and then an outburst of laughter as the audience perceived the incongruity of the notion. An albino caribou; an albino beaver, yes! but albino people? Who ever heard of White People? Even Daebaudjimoot had to laugh. The laughter gradually subsided.

“Are they like the macmaegawachnsuk [little people like leprechauns, elves]?” a man asked, inciting another wave of laughter.

“Are they like the Weendigoes,” an old woman enquired, igniting more guffaws. The old laughed at such notions; the young laughed to hear the adults giggle, roar, snigger and to see them twist their mouths and cheeks into a hundred shapes. At the same time the young wondered what beings in addition to the Weendigoes, macmaegawachnsuk, pauhechnsuk, zauwobeekumook, and Pauguk lurked in the forests and roamed about at night.

“What do these White People look like?” another old lady asked when she dried her eyes.

“The men and women that I speak of are all white, face, bodies, arms, hands and legs, pale as the rabbits of winter. And . . . they are hairy . . . hair growing on their arms, legs, chests, backs and arm-pits . . . and some men grow hair upon their faces around their mouths, drooping down from their chins, like moose beards.” Daebaudjimoot had to interrupt his narrative again for the nervous titters and embarrassed cackles that set off another uproar. The children chuckled and chorled as they imagined their playmates, maybe brothers and sisters, goateed like moose. Daebaudjimoot continued, “different too is the colour of their hair; some yellow as goldenrod; a few red as cranberries, and others black as our hair. In old age the white people’s hair turns white; on some men the hair falls off entirely so that their heads are as smooth and shiny as are pumpkins.

“Their eyes too are unlike ours; round . . . quite round . . . like the eyes of racoons . . . and blue like the colour of blueberries.”

There was more laughter but by now the men, women and children were nursing aching bellies and paining sides.

“And their dress too is as quaint as their appearance. For one thing, they cover their bodies completely, day and night, summer and winter; only their faces being visible. On their heads are head-winders that they wear indoors and out-of-doors, in sunshine and in rain. The men and boys wear a peculiar garment which is a loin cloth and leggings made of one piece to cover their hams but the garment is so tight that the men walk like mud-hens. Each time that they go to toilet even to drain their bladders they must unfurl these rump binders down to their ankles. The women’s garments are not much better than those of their men. The women wear a robe that covers them from their wrists and neck down to their very ankles. Underneath these loose bad-hangers the women wear tit flatteners and belly compressors. Their moccasins are made of a very hard substance, almost like wood, and cover their legs up to their very knee caps. It is only at night that the White People remove some of these garments.”

“Are they ashamed of their hair? of their organs?” an old woman quipped, rousing tired laughter.

Daebaudjimoot resumed his narrative. Hours later he predicted, “when they come, they will come from the east across a great body of salt water; and they will arrive on board great wooden canoes five times the length of one of our own canoes. At either end of these long canoes are tall timbers. From the limbs of these timbers are suspended blankets for catching the wind to drive the canoes without the aid of paddles.”

“Are they ash or maple? Fresh wood or dead? They go against the wind?” voices asked and made remarks ridiculing the idea of an oversized canoe with trees at either end.

“You laugh because you cannot picture men and women with white skins or hair upon their faces; and you think it funny that a canoe would be moved by the wind

across great open seas. But it won't be funny to our grandchildren and their great-grandchildren.

"In the beginning the first few to arrive will appear to be weak by virtue of their numbers, and they will look as if they are no more than harmless passers-by on their way to visit another people in another land who need a little rest and direction before resuming their journey. But in reality they will be spies for those in quest for lands. After them will come countless others like flocks of geese in their migratory flights. Flock after flock they will arrive. There will be no turning them back.

"Some of our grandchildren will stand up to these strangers but when they do, it will have been too late and their bows and arrows, war-clubs and medicines will be as nothing against the weapons of these white people whose warriors will be armed with sticks that burst like thunder-claps. A warrior has to do no more than point a fire stick at another warrior and that man will fall dead the instant the bolt strikes him.

"It is with weapons such as these that the white people will drive our people from their homes and hunting grounds to desolate territories where game can scarce find food for their own needs and where corn can bare take root. The white people will take possession of all the rest and they will build immense villages upon them. Over the years the white people will prosper, and though the Anishinaubaeg may forsake their own traditions to adopt the ways of the white people, it will do them little good. It will not be until our grandchildren and their grandchildren return to the ways of their ancestors that they will regain strength of spirit and heart.

"There! I have told you my dream in its entirety. I have nothing more to say."

"Daebaudjimoot! Are these white people manitous or are they beings like us?"

"I don't know."

As the men, women and children went out, a young man who had lingered behind remarked: "It's good to listen to you, but I don't believe you."

