

DARREL J. MCLEOD

## *Maci Manitowi (Devils)*

**T**HIS HAPPENS WHEN I AM A BABY. There is a knocking at the door of Mosom's trapping cabin—three sharp raps than a tense male voice. "Bertha McLeod. It's Mr. Jones—Alberta Social Services. I know you are in there. Can you please open the door?"

"Leave us alone."

"There's been a report of drunkenness and partying with children present. I need to see the children."

Bertha—my mother—hears Mr. Jones shuffle down the wooden plank that ramps up to the base of the porch, then his steps, returning.

"I know why you're here," she calls. "There ain't no party. I play guitar and sing to the kids sometimes. Ain't nobody drinkin'. The kids ain't here now anyways. They're visitin' my sister-in-law in Kinosew."

"I have it from a good source that there's been partying here. Children are being neglected."

"I don't know who coulda told you that. There ain't no party. Leave us alone."

"I need you to open the door. I have the authority to do a home inspection, and that is what I intend to do. I need to see your children."

"You are going to make sure my children are safe? That's my job. You take peoples' kids away—send them to white families. Everyone knows what you do! You're not taking my kids. Get outta here—*now!*"

"Bertha—I have the proper authority to do this. If you don't cooperate, I will simply have to come back with the police. It took a great deal of effort to get here. Please open up, so I can inspect and be on my way."

"I can't. You'll have to wait until Mosom gets home. There ain't nobody else around now. Don't trust men like you. The kids ain't here! There ain't nothin' for you to see." Standing right at the door she yells, "You can't

snoop around here! Just leave—now!” She leans over and grasps the handle of the large axe Mosom uses for splitting logs and pulls it closer. She knows she can maneuver it to defend her kids if she has to. Then she turns to her two small children. “Hide the baby—*kweeh ah hu*—hurry. Climb out the window. Go hide in the woodshed like I showed you.”

From where she guards the door, Mother watches Debbie wrap me, the baby, snugly—a scowl of intense determination on her face. She sets me into the cloth-lined basket, places it onto the chair, and climbs through the back window. Greggie strains to lift and pass the basket through—praying I won’t make a peep.

Then he in turn climbs onto the chair and struggles to pull himself up and out.

Bertha moves back into the porch, right in front of the door and stands tall, her hands trembling. Her worst nightmare is happening. She can’t open the door—she has to stall for time; thankfully, today is the day Mosom is supposed to return from his week-long hunting trip.

Mr. Jones shuffles on the plywood landing outside—then not a sound. Has he gone to peek through the windows of the front room? My God, is he going to go around—behind the cabin to the woodshed? Bertha holds her breath—listens intently. She hears him stepping back onto the platform in front of the porch. Good—he’s staying up front.

Trying to not make a sound, she sits on the kindling box in the porch and leans back against the wooden wall. She’ll wait him out. After all, what’s he going to do—break down the door? Well, he might try. She gets the large butcher knife from the kitchen and jams it into the door-frame—at least it would be one more obstacle should he try to break in. She lets her mind wander—thoughts about her predicament and her life with Mosom for the last few months take over.

She had prayed daily that Mr. Jones would never find his way to the tiny trapper’s cabin that Mosom, her grandfather, had set her up in, outside the tiny village of Spurfield. She and Mosom both knew that she had to hide deep in the woods with Debbie, Greggie, and baby Darrel—Lapatak.

Like her ancestors, Bertha had spent her whole life in the bush around Lesser Slave Lake. After the sudden and recent deaths—her husband Sonny, her mother, Cucuum Adele, and her cherished older brother Louis—she knew that the land, the rocks, the rivers and streams, the trees, plants, animals and birds would heal her family, help them to carry on with life. But she also knew that as a widow now—with no money, no home, and nowhere else to go—she would become a target. They would come for her children, just as they had come for her. She and Mosom had discussed the stories they had heard

about poor *Indian* families whose kids were taken away, never to be seen again. But now, in the late 1950s, not all of the kids were taken to a residential school. Instead many were given, or even worse—sold, to *Moniyawak*—white people—for adoption. Nobody understood why this was happening, other than the fact that the mothers were poor and usually single, just as Bertha was now. There were rumours that hundreds of kids had been taken away—to other provinces, to the United States, and even overseas.

Of course, it didn't help that Mable McLeod, her mother-in-law who had scorned her from the beginning, was angry that she had gone into hiding with *her* grandkids. Bertha even wondered if it was Mrs. McLeod who had sent Mr. Jones after her.

Sitting on the wood box, she feels a chill at the thought of losing Lapatak. He was a parting gift from Sonny. She loves to dote on him—cuddling him, tickling his belly with her vibrating lips, chanting to him in Cree, and pushing an engorged brown nipple into his insatiable puffy lips at the slightest whimper. Before each feeding, she tries to clear her head of sadness and anger by doing a smudge ceremony with sweetgrass and sage. And even through the haze of three burials, sleepless nights of grief and mourning, rotating visits of condolence, giving birth alone, and having to move her little family, she makes sure her milk is rich—she forces herself to eat plenty of the wild foods Mosom gathers and hunts.

*Wah wah!* Hasn't she survived enough challenges in the last six months without now facing the wicked Mr. Jones, whose main goal in life is to steal kids? For the past year or so, the bird messengers she trusts and relies upon to warn and guide her have been twittering, squawking, and cawing. Ravens and crows dive-bomb her head every time she steps outside. A sparrow has flown into the house, not once but twice. Many days, in the wee hours, woodpeckers drum on the south wall. She has become more anxious with each new sign. How could there be so much at once? But, the birds have never misled her. Day after day, she has been on edge—vibrating, wary of what will happen next.

Tears form in her eyes as she recalls watching Mosom, sitting in his homemade rocking chair, holding me—his thick white moustache and beard brushing against my soft face. She knows that Mosom's fragrance—a blend of peppermint tea, drum tobacco, wood smoke, and a gentle clean manly odour—is as comforting to me as it has been to her, from as early as she can remember.

They can't separate us now, she thinks. We are just starting to settle in with Mosom.



THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

My God, now he's pounding with his fists.

Grasping the black metal latch, Mr. Jones rattles the door.

"Bertha Dora McLeod, I know you're in there. I've been waiting here twenty minutes already. You may as well open the door. I can't go until I've seen the children and spoken to you. Open the door *now*."

She hears him shuffle away and is convinced he's going to check around the house and clearing. She can't breathe. She has to get outside to distract him—keep him away from the woodshed. She jumps up, pulls the knife out of the door frame and sets it on the kindling box—within her reach. She turns the simple lock and pulls the door open.

There he stands, Mr. Jones—a cross between an undertaker and a Catholic priest, with his sallow complexion, stiff black suit, bleached white shirt, and black tie. His silhouette in the open doorway contrasts sharply with the yellow, red, and golden leaves covering the ground and fluttering on the maple and poplar trees behind him. He reaches into the inside pocket of his suit coat and pulls out some folded papers. He has found her.

Mosom has been stalking a huge bull moose for six days now, following its tracks, observing where it goes to drink and to graze. And he has been observing the other animal tracks too—making sure that he himself isn't being stalked. He knows the bull's every move. Now it is about a quarter of a mile ahead of him, on its daily route. He is ready to take it down, but as he stands immobile under a tall jack pine—waiting, he senses that something is wrong at home. The birds are behaving oddly—warning him of danger. And Bertha is home alone with the three kids—no men and no rifle. He knows he has to get home *cepat*. The moose can wait until the next week. He picks up the cluster of rabbits he has snared and the bundle of fireweed, saskatoons, rat root, and wild mint he has gathered, and strides the two miles back towards his cabin.

From the edge of the forest he sees a black figure standing in his doorway. Mosom grasps right away who it is and why he is there. He glares at Mr. Jones' black coat, then notices Bertha's flushed and scowling face. Mr. Jones' right hand is raised and he is waving some white papers in the air. Mosom coughs.

Mr. Jones jerks his head back and looks behind him.

Mosom casts a slim and striking figure; he has the leathery and wrinkled face of an elder now, but is still a bold presence—a warrior. Calm and confident. His hunting rifle is slung loosely over his shoulder. His angry stare intensifies as his thoughts accelerate. This latest

scourge infuriates him. First the *Moniyawak* moved into their territory uninvited, making empty promises and offering beads and trinkets in exchange for lands, furs, and food. They'd spread the flu and small pox through infected blankets, causing the deaths of thousands of *Nehiyawak*. Then, they slaughtered the buffalo, causing widespread starvation. Every fall they still take *awasisuk* from their parents' arms and send them to live in residential schools, often with cruel priests and nuns, for months or years at a time—and now this: poor *Nehiyaw* children being sold or given away.

"Who is this old man?" Mr. Jones barks.

"Mosom. My Grandfather."

"Well he cannot interfere here. I have a statutory duty to check on the children. Where are they?"

"*Kigwaaey ntawayataman?*" Mosom's deep voice through clenched teeth.

Mr. Jones takes two steps towards him and tries to force eye contact. "Sir, you cannot interfere with my work. I must proceed. I need the children. Ahhhhh... Awaaasiiiiis-uk—and the baby."

Mosom stares right through him—slides his hunting rifle forward into his hands and jams the butt up against his shoulder. A sudden twitch of his right hand then a rapid *click-click* sound. Mr. Jones' head jerks back. His breathing becomes slow and deliberate; his face increasingly red with a scowl of frustration. He pivots and steps to one side. He raises both hands to shield his chest. Then he raises one hand higher and waves it frantically as he jerks up onto his toes and shouts, "Don't shoot, Mo-shomm! Please. I'll go."

His eyes jolt open and his scowl intensifies as he pleads, "Tell him, Bertha, please—tell him! It's okay. I'm going. I'm going."

"*AWASI! KWEE-AH HU! Atimochisk!*" Mosom shouts.

"*Maci manitow!*" He mutters as he and Bertha watch Mr. Jones' *whitikiw* figure shrink.

"*Tapwe,*" Bertha thinks, "*The devil.*"

Bertha calls out to Debbie and Greggie to bring me around from the woodshed. With her face alternating between a scowl and a smile, Debbie slowly carries me to where she is standing and carefully hands me over. She undoes the top of her blouse to give me a soothing feed of warm milk. Debbie and Greggie wrap their arms around her legs and press in as close as they can.



That night, Bertha has a restless sleep—a series of disturbing dreams. In the first, she is sitting at a metal kitchen table, surrounded by a sea

of broken glass—Ned, Sonny’s handsome older cousin who has been coming around lately, is yelling at her. He holds a screaming blond baby she has never seen before. But there is her Darrel, her sweet baby. He is bigger now—a young child, and he is lying on his stomach on the floor, pounding his fists and feet and yelling—*NO, NO, NOOOO*. The kitchen cupboards are all empty—every dish in the house is smashed. Her mouth drops open with shock. She tries to stand and then falls back into the kitchen chair—because who could do this thing? Who could smash all these dishes?

In the second dream, Debbie is dead. But she isn’t little—she is a grown woman, lying still in a coffin—surrounded by *Moniyawak*. Bertha screams “My girl. Oh my girl!” Muffled moans in her throat as she tosses and turns in her cot.

In her final dream, Darrel is a mature man. He’s handsome like Sonny, but has Bertha’s darker complexion and eyes. Wavy locks of silver frame his beaming face. She smiles and laughs with joy to see her baby as a fledgling elder. He’s sitting outside on the deck of a house that looks a lot like Mosom’s cabin—a grey weather-worn wooden exterior. But wait a minute, why is he alone? Where are his kids and grandkids? What is he doing? He’s perched on a high stool at a makeshift wooden table—it’s a sunny day; there’s a gentle breeze. He stares out over a vast oasis-blue sea. Birds are chirping and whistling all around him—towbees, blue jays, red-winged blackbirds, and hummingbirds: buzzing and flitting in all directions. The house is surrounded by giant spruce trees—ten times grander than the largest trees Bertha has ever seen. High overhead, barely visible, an eagle circles. On the table in front of him sits a glass goblet full of scarlet wine. High in front of his head he holds a white wafer, split in two—one half placed precisely over the other to form the shape of an owl—just like the priest does. He is chanting in a blend of Cree, some other strange *Indian* tongue, and English:

*“Ha-iy ha-iy Mosomwa, Cucuumwa,  
Hytchka siam. Ha-iy ha-iy.  
Thank you Grandfathers and Grandmothers.  
For making me the high priest of my own life, now and forever.  
Amen.  
...Ha-iy ha-iy. Ha-iy ha-iy”*

Suddenly she, Bertha, is there with him—off to one side and a few steps back. Smiling, she moves in closer—trembling. Her unsteady right arm is folded behind her back. In her hand she is grasping some hard object. What could it be? She brings her hand around and glances down. She gasps. She is holding Mosom’s sharpest hunting knife.