

Don't Hang onto me and Don't Fall Down

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I had been looking deep into the creek bottom marking the progress of water lilies and wriggling life forms. Every other day, I had to fish one of my equally curious little brothers out of the ice water. I was very good at balancing myself on the icy shoreline while leaning forward to peer into the clear water. We were enjoying this activity from first daylight till sundown when Mom and Dad announced we were returning to village life.

We were breaking camp for the village with its one Hudson's Bay store, one post office, one health clinic, one DNR office, one RCMP shop with its one jail cell, one school house with two classrooms, one Roman Catholic convent with four sisters, and three churches. We were cradle Catholics of one generation for sure. I did look forward to seeing one movie a week at the Canadian Legion Hall, and I could buy new comic books.

So we broke camp, putting away traps, cleaning out all the rubbish the spring devil had scattered all around, burned that, cleaned out the little camp destroying all the evidence of habitation. Mom and Dad loaded the canoe, perched and tied down on top of the sleigh, with all the fur pelts, moose hides, and some food for the trek home. All our possessions were packed tightly and efficiently and the dogs were eager as race horses chomped in their traces. Dad was the driver and we piled in and hung on for dear life.

This was the best life I was ever to live. Aunt Marie Louise had broke camp before us and there was talk of stopping by a certain grove of maple trees to make syrup, candy and fudge.

We were clipping along at a very good pace when the dogs sounded the first alarm. They started to yelp. Dad, an Indian man of a few choice words and Mom was

the same, stopped the heavy sleigh very quickly. We were on thinning ice, now we were in knee deep slush and rotten ice. The rotten ice was a vast pan of razor sharp ice crystals. The dogs had cut and bleeding paws. Dad said "Get out!" Mom strapped the baby across her stomach and chest. She said to me, "Walk behind me and don't hang onto me. Stay in my tracks." I did exactly as she said. I had to focus on one step at a time. Dad was pushing all the dogs and two frightened little boys with all his strength. We made slower progress, but we stayed upright and we did not lose anything. I broke through the ice only once filling one boot with ice water. There was no time to empty it.

After that treacherous crossing, we were able to move a little faster, but we came to a creek with very high snow banks of mixed packed and iced snow. At last, we spotted campers by a maple grove and we heard familiar voices. The younger of the two little boys found his loudest voice to express all his fright. Dad threw him up the shore and someone caught him. I was just glad to be able to empty my ice-filled boot. Later, I warmed, very slowly, my blue toes by a warm steady fire. Auntie Marie Louise was there with the promised maple syrup, buckets of tea were consumed and fresh bannock was set for us. We broke out the smoked and dried muskrat meat and all was well.

When everyone had arrived at this rendezvous, the men in the camp conferred how they would divide the loads to cross the half-opened very swift Saskatchewan River for the final trek home. The ice was like rubber, and imminent disaster loomed. Strength and agility were needed, here; the men matched strength-to-strength and agility to each canoe and sleigh crossing. This is where you can see the Okimah system work. The most experienced are elected to lead and guide the men, but first we needed to rest for one night.

I woke up to hear fearsome howling. All the dogs were in an uproar and wolf packs were descending on the side as we carried fresh meat, fish and dried smoked meats. I was told to stay out of the way and out of sight. The men had built huge bonfires. And the shadows of huge wolves, all alpha males paced intently in the dark woods. This went on till dawn, we lost nothing but sleep. There was no waiting around in the first hint of dawn. This is where the endurance of the hunters comes to light.

First canoe, men on either side, pushing hard, running, jumping in, paddling furiously in the open water, off loading, heading back quickly as long as the ice holds. Repeating till the women and children can be traversed safely. Uncle Roger, Uncle Hilliard, Uncle Isidore, Uncle Bill, Uncle Shatu, and Dad: the talking is done with when they spring into action. Each man knows what he has to do and does it. Uncle Roger, the last of these men, went into the Spirit World last February, 2010. At that time, he was barely in his twenties. If present Aboriginal men and women are able to show those strengths and integrity today in everything we do, we will survive another thousand years.

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