

Just a Simple Stone

Last Summer

A young hand holds the pointed metal trowel. It is a woman's hand, the skin is tight and free of spots and wrinkles. A fine layer of dust settles over the hand as it sweeps the trowel back and forth across the earth floor. The hand is experienced, knowing when to slow the sweeping motion and to pick carefully at the sudden appearance of a strange object. Punctuating the monotony of her task, a glassy clink rings out against the metal edge of the tool; Lisa quickly picks up a small paintbrush and begins to clear the area where the sound came from. Grains of dirt are brushed aside, and the outline of a tiny triangular stone is revealed. An old dental pick is used to probe the edges of the stone and then to lever it out of its ancient resting place. Dusty fingers lift the stone from the ground and, at the same time, jab the dental pick into the earth to mark its location. Rubbed between the thumb and forefinger, the dirt falls away from the stone and the outline of an exquisitely crafted arrowhead is revealed.

A cry of discovery from Lisa brings the other crew members to the side of the square hole where she kneels. Ancient tools are only rarely discovered, and each one is significant. Lisa extends her hand toward the crew with the tiny arrowhead nestled in the cup of her palm. A cascade of dirty fingers probe it, flip it over, trace its outline. The crew exclaims its praise and admiration, for this is the first point found today. Except for Bob. He's the competitive one, acting up bitterly when someone else makes an important discovery. Bob notes the flaws – a slight chip off the tip, a minor asymmetry to the edges of the blade. With a disgruntled face, Bob announces that he'd be embarrassed to admit to having found such an ugly point and that Lisa had better get back to work and find the rest of it, the part she probably broke off while digging. The crew laughs as they return to

their own pits. The mood is upbeat now; the day is looking better, and Bob has performed to expectations.

Lisa flips a metal pail upside down and uses it as a seat at the side of her pit. She pulls a clipboard onto her lap and makes the necessary notes about her discovery. A small, brown paper bag is retrieved from her backpack, and she scribbles on it the information about the location of the point. The work is routine, and on most days Lisa would drop the point in the bag and return to digging. But it is still morning; she is feeling fresh and alert, unlike later in the day when the oppressive heat infuses a great lethargy. The wind is from the west and there is still a sublime coolness to it, a refreshing change from the hot blasts that cascade down the Porcupine Hills onto the parched prairie. The pleasure of the morning discourages routine. Lisa closes her palm around the arrowhead, announces she's on a break, and walks off toward the cliff.

Saskatoon bushes grow thick where water seeps out from under the bedrock escarpment. Other than that, there is not a shred of tall vegetation to be seen, nor any relief from the relentless sun. Lisa ducks under the shady side of a Saskatoon bush and sits facing out the expanse of prairie. She uncurls her fingers and looks intently at the tiny arrow point. So thin, so delicately made. It's hard to imagine that human hands using only crude tools could fashion such an exquisite piece. Yet she knows they did, thousands of times over. Lisa picks the point up with her fingers, turning it, examining it, first admiring its beautiful craftsmanship and then imagining the intangible realm that spurs people to be curious about the past. She wonders about the person who made this arrowhead. She stares intently at the artifact in her hand, as if sheer concentration might open a portal to the past.

A human being made this about a thousand years ago. Was it a young man exercising his skill as a hunter and proving himself as a provider? Was it a revered elder who had mastered the trade and supplied finished points to his people? What happened on the day this point was used? Had it brought success to the owner and claimed the life of a mighty buffalo, or had it missed its mark and sailed into the earth never to be reclaimed?

Lisa knew she would never have the answers to these questions. But she did know this: she was the first human to hold this arrowhead since a thousand years ago when the maker lashed it to a thin, wooden shaft and fired it at the thrashing body of a wild buffalo. That was

all she needed. A connection. A bond between her and the ancient arrowhead maker and the mysterious and exotic world in which he lived. This is what gave her purpose, provided meaning to her work. This is why she knew she would go on investigating the past. The ancient craftsman could no longer speak, but he had provided the future with a tiny piece of his life. And now that tool would speak for him. It was both humbling and empowering.

Lisa closed her fingers around the point and headed back toward the excavation pit. This land, the plains around her, truly had no limits. The sky, stretching from the horizons, enveloped her in a radiant glow of blue light. Ground squirrels, protected from predators by the archaeologists' presence, scurried across the shortgrass prairie, diving into their maze of holes. She smiled as she watched them. They had grown almost tame now that the crew shared the crumbs of their lunches with them. Lisa disliked the way the squirrels disturbed the artifacts under the earth, rooting around and moving them out of their proper position, but she also envied them. They lived in the underworld, nestled in among the fragile vestiges of an ancient way of life. Sometimes she wished she could make herself impossibly small and join them, living in the dank, musky sediments where the mysterious people once lived.

Knowing she was sensitive, Blackfoot members of the dig crew loved to tease Lisa. Using small snares of string, they would catch ground squirrels as they emerged from their holes and then laugh uproariously as Lisa lunged to release them. They gave her an honorary Blackfoot name: Naapissko, Gopher Woman.

A Thousand Years Ago

The hand looks impossibly old, more like leather than skin, sun-baked brown in colour, gullied with deep lines, like the trails of ancient rivers. The fingernails are streaked with cracks that show as faint yellow lines, but the fingertips glisten with a bright red substance. As does the small odd-shaped stone that they hold.

Smoke from the burning bundle of grass forms a tiny ribbon, rising in a thin twisting wisp. An overpowering sweet smell fills and lingers inside the buffalo-skin dwelling. A long braid of sweet-grass rests on the edge of a ring of rocks. The leather brown hands twist and break more dried grass from the braid and sprinkle the

shreds onto the red-black coals. For a moment the coals seem ineffective, extinguished, but a steady breath blows across the embers and a bright, orange glow sparks through the shredded grass. The dried sweetgrass crackles and a fresh wave of pungent smoke rises straight up toward the opening at the top of the conical tent. The red-tinged fingers grip the small stone and move it into the plume, holding it for a few seconds enveloped in the smoke, then pulling it back. Again. And again. Four times into the smoke.

The voice is cracked and aged, but still husky. It is the voice of Ipii Miistip Kipitaapii, Far Away Old Woman, named for having been plucked as a young bride from a tribe living west across the mountains. But she has lived most of her life in this country now, and she is one of the Niitsitapi, the Real People. As she chants, the fingers of Far Away Old Woman hold the sacred Iniskim, the buffalo stone. The Spirit Beings leave these for the Real People to find, scattered thinly across the land. She knows she is lucky to find one. Shaped like the mighty buffalo, the stone is a sign of power and good fortune. And it must be treated with great respect, rubbed all over with the brilliant red mineral pigment. Only then, and in the hands of a person who has earned the right to lead the ceremony, can the Iniskim be brought forward into the smoke, for the lives of the Real People depend on it.

The chant is rhythmic and hypnotic, as if conjured not from within Far Away Old Woman but from within an entire people. It is a chant of continuation, like the people themselves:

Spirit powers, we honour you with this smoke. And we call for your help. Let this smoke fog the eyes of the buffalo, so that they are blinded to the trap that lies ahead. Let this smoke cloud the minds of the buffalo, so they do not know we are coming for them. Let this smoke bring success, so that the Real People are fat with food. Let this smoke keep the Real People safe from harm, so that we may honour you again another day. Spirit powers let the spirit of the buffalo give itself to us.

The hands of Far Away Old Woman shake with age, but she reaches with purpose toward the curling smudge of sweetgrass. She cups her hands around a wisp of smoke and brings it to her head, which she bows as she passes a hand to each side, infusing her hair with the cleansing aroma. She prays for her ancestors. She reaches again and this time brings the gathered smoke to the left side of her

body, washing it over her shoulder then down her arm and leg until she finally plants a palm on the beaten grass of the tipi floor. She prays for her parents and her brothers and sisters. A third time she cups the smoke and cleanses the right side of her body, asking the spirit powers to protect the elders and medicine people who surround her in the tipi. A final time she reaches into the smoke, bringing the last handful to her heart. She clasps her hands and for the first time looks around at those seated to each side of her. Hun Yaah, she says. It is good.

The half dozen or so men and women sitting along the back edge of the tipi now reach toward the thin wisp of smoke. The smudge of sweetgrass is nearly extinguished. Their reach is symbolic, the smoke much too far away to grasp, but they pull their hands back and clasps their chest, reciting in a low voice their own special prayers. A few voices linger, people who have more to ask of the spirit world. Everyone sits quietly until the last voice fades, and then Hun Yaahs are heard all around and people begin to shift their positions. All in the tipi this day are old, the ones who know the proper words and actions; today is not a day for teaching the young. That will happen on leisurely days in camp, when less depends on it.

Getting up is an effort. Everyone is stiff. They groan and complain as they slowly rise from the soft matted hair of the buffalo hides that have been spread across the ground. But there is laughter and chuckling as they tease each other about being so old. The mood is good; they know the ceremony went well. Everyone can feel it.

Far Away Old Woman leads the procession out of the tipi, circling clockwise like the sun around the fireplace, then throwing open the leather flap covering the east-facing door. A brilliant flash of sunlight streams in and casts a radiant glow into the opaque dwelling, like a candle inside a gossamer shell. The old woman steps into the blinding light and, still carrying the Iniskim, she again circles with the sun in front of the Real People who have waited outside in the camp. There are no speeches, no announcements. The ceremony needed to be done, and now it is finished. The woman opens a small leather bag – it too is deeply stained with red pigment – and places the Iniskim inside. Then she walks off toward the cliff.

The sheer sandstone wall shimmers with a golden hue in the drenching light of the sun. The sky above a cobalt blue, so deep it seems three dimensional, as if you could fall into it. Far Away Old

Woman stops to watch a red-tailed hawk gliding far above in the winds that sweep over the cliff. It soars in slow motion, almost hovering, then folds its wings and plummets toward the earth. Like a stone dropped from the cliff, it dead-falls as if it will crash headfirst into the solid dirt of the plain until, impossibly, at the last moment the legs are thrust out and the talons open like the jaws of a vise. A ground squirrel stands upright, perched on the small earthen mound above the subterranean opening to home and safety. It scans the prairie for signs of threatening movement, oblivious to the predator rocketing out of the sky. Just before the hawk slams into the earth, the wings spread to slow the descent and the talons reach for the squirrel. The rodent is smashed into the ground; locked firmly in the claws of the hawk, it is immediately lifted into the air, squirming, squeaking a high-pitched squeal. The red-tail stretches its wings to their full extent, labouring with the weight of her burden in the still air below the cliff.

Squinting into the bright light of the sky, Far Away Old Woman watches the hawk slowly climb with its trophy. The predator has its prey and will eat well tonight. She smiles, nods her head with resolution, and resumes her slow climb toward the cliff. Today the Piskun will earn its name, Deep Kettle of Blood. It will be a good day.

Three Months Later

Lisa kneels on the baked prairie, gathering up the small excavation tools: dental picks, grapefruit knives, paint brushes, tape measures. She drops them into a dented metal tool box, slings a small backpack over one shoulder, and rises, for the last time, from the outline of her excavation pit. Around her lies a lattice of empty dirt squares, a patchwork of brown set against the waving prairie grass. It's time to give up life on the high plains and head back to life in the big city.

The rough fescue grass has turned brown and brittle in the drought of late summer. It crunches and breaks under her boots as she walks across the Head-Smashed-In prairie. The air is a little cooler, laced with a freshness that hints at a change of season. Gophers are scarce now, only a few make their final forays across the plains to pack the last bits of food into their underground dens. Soon snow will blanket the ground, sealing in gophers and most other prairie life for another winter of retreat. The archaeologists mimic the natural world. Naapissko, Gopher Woman, is heading home.

Lisa is tired and sore. Ending the dig is always the hardest part. Long days and nights stack up on each other as the end of the season draws near. There is so much to do at the end – pits that are not quite finished, walls of dirt that must be sketched and photographed, artifact bags to be labelled and packed, notes to be finished before memories fade. And then the dreaded backfilling: Putting all the dirt back into the square holes, minus all the artifacts, bones, and rocks that were removed, and minus vast clouds of dust that blew from the shaker screens as each bucket was sifted. There is never enough dirt to fill the pits. Lisa pitches in with the crew as they scrounge the area for rocks, or dirt to place in the excavations, hauling seemingly endless wheelbarrow loads. Unlike the careful digging of the site, there are no rewards to this work; it is simply back-breaking labour.

Empty pop cans are tossed into the soft earth as the pits are filled. The littering is rationalized. The cans will serve as markers for future archaeologists, a way of saying that the area has already been dug. The wind and dust have sucked the moisture from Lisa's skin. She relishes the refreshing taste of the pop. She tosses the empty can on one of the backfilled pits and crunches it under the surface with her boot. A poor person's time capsule, she muses, as she heads off toward the waiting Suburban.

Leaving a site where you have spent months of your life, digging up the remains of those who lived there before you, is harder for some than for others. For some, the work is simply a step on a career path, an unemotional job that yields material for a thesis or dissertation. For Lisa it was an experience for which she now realizes she was unprepared, the experience of being immersed, simultaneously, in both the past and the present. The past is expected, lying at your feet every moment of every day. It's the present that catches her off guard.

She had not anticipated the extent to which she and the project would figure into the lives of seemingly unconnected people – the rural community that eyes you first as a curiosity and, eventually, as a part of them. Staff at the town pool where you swim and shower regarding your inconvenient evening arrival with mild annoyance but, over time, coming to sit by the edge of the water to talk about what you have been finding. Shopkeepers, distrustful, at first, of running accounts for strangers but then learning your names and wondering what they can order in for your project. Local teachers, reading the stories of the dig in the community paper, asking to bring their classes

to the site or to have you come to school with artifacts and engaging stories of times gone by. Ranchers, people with whom you thought you might have little in common, inviting you for huge steak dinners, during which you discover they respect the land in the same way as the people who came before them.

Lisa knows that she is transient on the landscape; as she prepares to leave, the community stays behind. They hunker down through another winter and relive the residue of your impact on their lives, wondering if you are coming back, calling long distance to enquire if their children might be part of next year's crew. It is a burden that Lisa takes seriously, even relishes. She has learned that the work is important to the people of this small town, and, by extension, she is important. She thought she came to study only the past but found herself immersed in the present.

The dust swirls furiously through the air. Two red-tailed hawks hover overhead, their wings motionless in the fierce wind. The crew is milling around the Suburban and the equipment trailer, alternately packing and seeking refuge in the lee of the vehicle. Aluminum lawn chairs, bent and barely usable, are tossed in. Huge plastic coolers, their lids filthy from having served for months as lunch tables, are packed full with digging gear and kitchen stuff. Lisa joins in packing as the daily artifact bags into cardboard boxes. This is where the goodies are kept: stone tools, precious charcoal for radiocarbon dates, bones of the slaughtered buffalo. As they sort through bags from the numbered squares, Lisa suddenly remembers the small bag in her backpack.

She rummages through her pack and pulls out the crumpled, worn brown bag. Inside is the exquisite arrow point that Lisa found early in the summer. She has kept it with her all this time as one of the prime show-and-tell pieces, items the crew keep handy to show visitors what they are finding. Lisa slides it out of the bag one last time, nestling it in her palm. The point glistens now, rubbed by many fingers. She flips it over, admiring its near-perfect symmetry. She remembers her joy at first finding the piece, wondering about the person who made it so many years ago. But in the ensuing months, Lisa has come to appreciate a new importance to the arrowhead, not what it tells her about people from the past but what it means to the future.

The finely crafted arrow point has come out of its bag time and again to show the curious visitors. Lisa remembers especially the children. Busloads have come from the nearby Piikani reserve. At

first it was a game to the kids, running around chasing gophers and playing in the dirt at the screens. But when Lisa pulls the artifacts from her pack, she suddenly has their attention. The kids gather and press close to her, staring wide-eyed at the point held between her fingertips. She talks to them about an ancient hunter who made this piece a thousand years ago and shot it at a massive buffalo. She asks them if they could pick a simple rock from the ground and chip out something so perfect and beautiful. Then she calls one of the youngest boys forward and asks him to hold out his hand. Lisa tells the group of the great skill the maker must have had to craft a piece so fine that it is still sharp today. And with that she reaches out and gently pokes the tip of the point into the outstretched palm of the child. Thinking back to these moments, Lisa smiles to herself, loving the memory of what became such a predictable routine.

Pandemonium breaks loose. The child shrieks, clasps his palm closed, and jerks his hand back. But the child is smiling. For just a moment all the other children are stunned, and then, in a flash, a dozen other hands are thrust toward Lisa, like tentacles of a giant octopus, each child begging to be poked. Methodically, she works the crowd, poking each kid in turn, with each response the same as the first young boy's. Eventually, the game over, Lisa hides the arrow point and settles the children down. Then she kneels on the ground to be at their eye level. Again she holds up the point between her fingers.

We don't know the name of the person who made this, she says, but it was someone from long ago. Maybe he was one of your own ancestors. We do know he was a person of great skill and courage, someone who faced wounded and enraged buffalo with this tiny arrowhead. That person, and those who lived with him, only left us a few precious objects to tell the stories of their lives. So, Lisa asks, do you think we need to protect these things from the past so that those stories can be remembered? Heads nod all around her. Should we not, she says, show respect for things like this, because by doing so we honour and respect the people who made them? Lisa looks out at a sea of young eyes gazing back at her.

Three Days Later

Several men of the Niitsitapi are taking down the few remaining tipis. They remove the slender bone pins that hold the huge sheets

of hide together and let them slide to the ground. While women disassemble the separate pieces of buffalo hide that make up the tipi covers, men begin slinging the long, straight poles into stacks on the ground. Tipi poles are precious to the people of the treeless prairies, and they will be dragged to the nearby winter camp. The Real People are moving on.

Dogs run freely now, finally set loose in after days of being tethered. They were tied and muzzled during the buffalo drive to prevent their spooking the herd and then were restrained during the days of butchering to keep them from being a nuisance around the carcasses. Now they tear across the prairie, gripped in a feeding frenzy on entrails, fresh bones, and scattered bits of meat. The dogs run off the flocks of crows and magpies that have settled on the debris on the outskirts of the camp and snarl at the skulking coyotes that try to duck in and steal off with a juicy bone. Far Away Old Woman watches the dogs with amusement, thinking they too need to have their moments of pleasure. Soon enough they will be harnessed for the strenuous work of moving camp.

The camp resembles a military operation, with groups of weary hunters engaged in their pre-departure tasks: binding sets of poles to form travois, stacking up parfleches of dried meat, collecting bones that will later be boiled for their grease, cutting handholds in hides so they can be loaded with goods and dragged across the prairie, retrieving countless tools scattered across the ground. The crisp air of autumn helps keep them cool as they strain against the burden of a hundred buffalo carcasses. The cobalt blue sky envelops them. Despite their exhaustion, the mood of the Niitsitapi is high. The kill and the butchering have gone as well as anyone could have hoped. The Real People will be fed, clothed, and housed for many months to come. The spirit of the Creator has smiled on them.

Far Away Old Woman sits at the back wall of her tipi, reclining against the woven cane backrest. In front of her is the fireplace and next to it a small altar made from clumps of sod turned over and painted half red and half black. Her tipi will be the last one taken down, a sign of respect for her as the Holy Woman of the people. She tosses the last scraps of wood on the fire, thinking they will only go to waste once the tipi comes down. She might as well enjoy a final burst of heat before giving up her shelter and heading off on the march to the winter camp.

Far Away Old Woman puts the palms of her hands down to the floor and runs them over the soft hair of the bison robe on which she sits. Even years after this buffalo gave its life to the Niitsitapi, the hairs still glisten with a bright sheen, as if sprinkled with droplets of oil. The Old Woman knows this means it was a fat buffalo that gave up its life. The hairs of the hide are cool as she works her fingers through them, until she lets her palms rest for a moment in one place. Then she feels the warming properties of the hide begin to work. Her aged hands are often cold now, unlike when she was young, and she knows the time will not be long before she passes on to the Great Sand Hills. She lets her hands linger on the hide, the warmth rising through her flesh, and just for a moment her skin is soft again.

Such a small thing, she thinks, this great warmth that the bison has given to her people. Just a tiny part of all that the buffalo provides, yet one that helps keep the Niitsitapi alive through the harshest winter. As she has so many times before, Far Away Old Woman shakes her head in wonder at the wisdom of the Creator. Who but such a powerful and benevolent spirit could have imagined a creature that gives so much to one people? She rubs her hands again through the dense fur and knows that the Niitsitapi are truly blessed.

The midday wind is starting to come up. She hears it growl under the stones that hold down the bottom edges of the tipi cover. The walls of the tent shudder, the fire leaps and retracts in time with the vibrations. She knows she must get moving. Soon the wind will make it difficult to take down the tipi. Her cloudy eyes survey the piles of belongings inside: the packs of dried meat, the rolled backrests and buffalo robes, a bundle of her clothes and moccasins, a wooden tripod that holds the war shield of her late husband, Weasel Tail. The taut hide of the shield is finely decorated with the emblem of his great power, the pelts of one of nature's greatest hunters, the weasel. The Old Woman stirs, lingering on the memory, then lets it slide away. It is time to move on.

The wrinkled hand of Far Away Old Woman reaches for the Iniskim that lies on a soft bed of blue-green sage beside the fire. She holds it in her palm for a few moments, thinking about the enormous power of such a little piece of stone. Then she pulls open the drawstrings of a small hide bag and places the Iniskim inside. The pouch is coated red inside and out, for the Iniskim must always be steeped in the sacred paint. She bends down and places the pouch alongside the

Imagining Head-Smashed-In

other contents of her powerful medicine bundle and carefully ties the bundle closed with thongs of rawhide. All the sacred items are now secure, ready for the next time help from the spirit world is needed.

Far Away Old Woman scoops the medicine bundle into her arms and circles clockwise, with the sun, around the inside of the tipi. She throws aside the hide flap of the door and emerges into the brilliant sunlight. Battered by a fierce wind, she cradles the bundle tightly against her chest. Through the bundle's hide covering she can feel the hard buffalo stone pressed against her thin flesh. She feels its presence and wonders, as she has so many times before, about the small buffalo-shaped rock's connection with the spirit world and how it lures great herds to the deadly cliff. Far Away Old Woman knows she will never understand the power of the Iniskim. But she knows that the sacred stone has, since the beginning of time, made it possible for the Niitsitapi to survive on this endless expanse of prairie. And that it always will. As long as the buffalo roam.