

A Woman Who Married Yamozha*

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What is this man? He comes to our shelter through the bush, and he spends the night. He sits with the man who is my father, listening, speaking only to ask questions. Where does he come from, this man who speaks no name, speaks not of himself? The old woman who is my mother shuffles around the fire, drops stones into the cooking pot, the caribou stomach. Her eyes shine with the fire, wet fire. She points her eyes to the stranger and then to me, and I feel frightened.

The old man sits and talks, talks through the smoke to this man, this silent man. Why does this man turn my hair to bone, like a porcupine's hair, when I have faced the horns of a charging moose without a shiver? This man who only looked at me once as I carried the water from the stream. Did he even look once? He must have, for when he looked at me I felt myself, felt the hide rubbing my skin, my soft places. His look made me a woman. No season of first blood in the lonely tent could do that.

And now the old woman murmurs. Murmurs a far away song, like a song deep inside, a song of life before the world, a song from the waters of the belly. The old woman pokes the cooking stick into the pot and pulls out meat. The men eat, tearing the meat from the bone with their teeth. And I cannot help staring at this man through the hairs of my eyes.

Then the fear. Will there be meat left after the men are finished? That hungry

time when I was young and we camped with the people who had many little ones and hunger called up the bad spirits, there was a woman with a swollen belly who grabbed meat from the pot before the men were satisfied.

The dark shelter presses down on my beating heart, beating like the death drum as the old woman murmurs. My legs are straight under the sleeping robe, straight and stiff, hoping never to bend again after the endless kneeling of a woman's life. I stare past the hairy edge of the robe, up to the covering of the shelter watching the darkness, solid above the glow of the little night fire. The old woman is murmuring; the old man is croaking like a frog.

A sound stills the world like lightning. I shudder then again the frog and the murmuring and I almost move my stone legs and breathe again. There is breath beside me and form. Fingers pass over my face, drawing my brow and cheeks, making my nose and lips. Breath moves the hair of the eyes. The fingers trace the bone of the jaw, stroke the hollow of the throat, slip down under the hide to the soft mounds, gently squeeze. My heart pumps blood to his fingers as they pinch the tips hard as arrowheads. A scream rises in my throat but is smothered by his mouth. My legs lose their stiffness and bend open, kneeling upside down under the robe, but the fingers stay at my breasts, the mouth at my mouth until my stifled scream dies. Then there is the coolness of the night air on my heated skin as the fingers and the mouth and the breath move away in the darkness.

In the morning nothing. Not a sign. Not even the touch of his eye. He goes hunting with the old man. I see how the old man struts with his bow and the eagle-feathered arrows. I see the man watch the bow. I see him watch the fine arrowheads. Does he remember? The tips of my nipples rub against the caribou skin of my dress and they remember. But what? What is there to remember but fear? Fear of hunger, fear of pain, fear of ...?

The old woman mutters as she lifts the hide up to the rack and prepares to scrape. I watch her knees press into the ground before the skin which must lose its hair before it can be a garment for the old man. And I think of my knees, up under the robe as those fingers pinched my nipples and that mouth cut off my scream. Was it like that for the old woman? And what is yet to come? Will he come again?

But she will say nothing. Now she mutters, but she will say nothing. Why is it that the old man's tongue can dance like a bush in a storm and never tire, but the old woman will only mutter or moan? What can make a woman speak?

And the old man with eagle feathers on his arrows. Feathers gathered from the ground under the empty nest. A sure-footed girl can follow a man and see. The old woman, not old then, but proud with the man child on her back. Proud to have been a good woman to the man. The man who raged that the first-born had been a daughter when a hunter was needed. And me struggling even then with the water and the sticks for the fire. But I had not yet learned to kneel. And the woman put the child on my back so she could rest while the man was gone and I walked to the river with my bark pails and my brother on my back. What if he finds the eagle feather on my belly?

I saw the world from my mother's stomach before I was born. I heard the drums, the man's chants, the woman's murmuring. The man walked in front, the load on his back. The woman pulled the curved sled over the snow. There was no stillness in the dark, always the thump thump thump thump of her heart. Then out of the watery darkness they would rise. The sharp beak, the enormous limbs, the huge bulging eyes, the grizzled hair. And I heard the shrieks from white heads. The croaks of the huge bag jaws. The shaking of the earth as the beast passed by. But I never saw this man.

The old woman mutters at me and I pick up the hide bag and walk into the bush to check my snares for hare. I move like a cloud, my moccasins breathing over the ground, my eyes tracing yesterday's trail by remembered tree roots and half-hidden stones and animal scratchings on tree bark, on toward the still fur in the loop of sinew I carefully placed in the almost unnoticed run of the little jumper.

And then there he is freeing the dead hare from the snare. He is crouched there stealing my hare, his weapons on the ground beside him. His black-haired skull is unsheltered and my fingers curl around the small root which is my club and a shriek tells me to swing it now, crush the bone of the head, save myself now. Then he turns and holds up the hare and hands it to me as if he knew I was there all the time.

I am frozen. I cannot take the animal from him. He drops it at my feet, then bends to pick up the skin-wrapped meat from the man's hunt. His eyes pierce me as he lifts the meat to his shoulder. Then he slips away through the bush.

When I pick up the hare my hands feel weak and I feel smaller. But one doesn't refuse a hare that has pushed its neck into one's snare. Even if this man has dropped it to the ground. The hare feeds the women and the men when the moose and the caribou stay away. Still, there is an ache in my back as I return to the camp.

The men are already sitting at the fire and the old man's tongue wags without stopping. I hang my bag with the hare from a branch and take the bark pails to fill from the stream. What if he finds the eagle feather on my belly? But it will be dark, won't it? The old woman is heating the stones in the fire. I fill the stomach pot with water, then kneel before the meat, unwrapped on the hide. It is moose. The stone knife tears at the sinews and the meat. I try to keep the pieces small so the water will cook it faster. The old man talks. The visitor asks. He asks about the feathers on my father's arrows. My breath stops as I wait for my father's answer. What will he tell this man? My father boasts about the eagle, about the eagle he killed to avenge the death of his son. My knees press into the ground, my thighs squeeze my calves, and my buttocks rest on the ground between my feet. My mother lowers the hot stone into the water and the water smoke rises from the pot. Then she gathers the pieces of meat from the hide and drops them into the pot. The eagle feather burns on my belly.

I dipped the bark pail into the river to fill it with the clear water. The man child squirmed on my back, the stink from the moss bag spoiled the freshness of

the air above the rushing water. And then the shriek that bit into me like ice. I tried to rise just as the force hit me and knocked me down. And then my back was light, unburdened, free for a moment, until the shriek ripped the sky again and I scrambled up to watch in terror as the eagle soared with the baby in its claws.

I think my father beat me, but my flesh did not hurt. The white-headed beak inside me shrieked and I felt like stone. When I returned to the stream I took off the hide dress and walked into the burning stream. That's when I first saw the eagle feather on my belly. I felt power, and I followed my father as he hunted for the eagle's nest. I saw him shrink in fear when he saw the bald bird on the cliff. I saw him pick up the fallen feathers from below the nest and bring them home to my mother as proof of his revenge.

Where is my power now? Why do I feel so weak in the darkness so helpless inside my caribou robe? What is there to fear about a man? Why did I let him pinch my nipples? No moose or bear would have dared. And I was kneeling upside down and I couldn't even scream.

Then his breath is on my face, his fingers trace my cheekbones. And his mouth covers mine as his hands slip inside the caribou hide dress again, squeezing, pinching, stroking, exploring further as my knees draw back again, wide, probing the strange moistness until I feel I'm on the edge of a cliff, slipping. Then he stops, slowly withdraws his hand. And leaves me there still on the edge.

The spirits come out of the darkness. They are all there, eagle, mammoth, frog, bear and more. The eagle feather on my belly sears like a cooking stone. The mammoth drags past. The giant frog croaks and the grizzly bear growls. I feel strong again. I will not kneel.

The old woman is cutting the boughs from the spruce trees that lie on the other side of the cooking fire. The trees were not there when the last darkness came. Before the next darkness the new shelter is there, ready with the smoky-sweet smell of a new robe on a bed of fresh spruce boughs. Only in danger has the old woman worked so quickly, and so well. Only in danger have I worked so quickly, and so well.

She speaks to me then, muttering, mumbling, murmuring, singing as my blood drums, drums, drums, drums. When she stops the low sun pierces the treetops and I walk to the stream. I leave the hide on a rock and with only the eagle feather on my belly I enter the cold water and let the stream prepare me. A new garment waits for me on the rock.

The men are returned, talking eagle feathers. The old man makes mountains and nests and eagles with his talk. The old woman stirs in the pot. She makes no sound. No eyes open to my new garment.

I enter the shelter alone, enter the dark. I breathe in the spruce and the hide. I slip into the robe. The boughs push at me like water pushes at a canoe. Outside I hear the drum, the voice of my father, the voice of my mother. And then his voice. A laugh. Bold. Another laugh. Bolder. A last laugh. Faint choking. The drum, the old woman mutters, the old man rattles on. Air sifts through the

shelter, slips under the robe, under the hide dress. My legs spread at his touch, kneel upside down. His fingers move aside the hide dress and the cool air tingles my fiery skin, freezing it, then his skin crushes the cool air, burns my cool skin. Then he opens me, enters me, splits me. My spirits squeeze aside as he moves inside me, fills me, shudders me, divides me. His spirit enters me, jostling the mammoth, the grizzly, the frog, the eagle and I move as he moves to make room in my crowded belly trying to give a spirit in return. Then he stops and for a moment I feel his fingers on the eagle feather on my belly. Fear strikes through me and I feel my spirits stumbling. Then his lips caress the breast over my heart and I feel filled full with the drumming as the cool air rolls in between us. He slumps to the robe beside me, falls like an empty bag and snores. Have I given him nothing? Have I just taken all and overcrowded my belly with restless spirits? Is the eagle feather still there on my belly? I sit up in the grey light before the early summer sun and dare to look at my belly. The eagle feather is still there. I pull the caribou hide dress down over my thighs and dream.

He is gone when the old woman pokes me with her stick. She mutters still. And I feel only a slight moistness in the place of his presence. The sun is in the sky and the thongs of the bark pails press into my fingers. My belly seems at peace and my moccasins are light. The kneeling ache of my legs is faint. The stream chills my feet and my dress is too comfortable and the wetness between my legs is too warm to give to the water.

A drop of rain touches my cheek and I lift my face and put out my tongue to catch another. I see the tiny grey cloud release a small mist then disappear. I dip my pails into the stream and suddenly, I feel a clawing inside my belly and pain on my skin. I drop my pails and raise my dress. The eagle feather glistens with blood. There is a screech inside me, then ice clatters from the sky. My belly churns with frantic clawing. Then the sun returns, hot. I pick up the pails, fill them. When I straighten my back I still feel stooped.

He returns with eagle feathers, plucked feathers with blood on the roots. He sits by the fire, talking this time, making the old man listen. And when I set meat before him he tells me, the woman who keeps his shelter, to kneel, to hear. I hear the story, the eagle's nest on the cliff, the young eagles waiting for food from their parents, waiting for their parents to bring them human flesh, how the young female eagle said that she enjoyed eating human flesh, how he killed her with his club, how the young male eagle insisted that he only ate human flesh because that was all his parents fed him, how he taught the young male eagle to eat ducks and fish, how a drizzle signalled the homecoming of the mother eagle, how he clubbed her down, how the hail warned of the father eagle's coming, how he clubbed him down, how he plucked the best feathers from the eagles, how now men had nothing to fear from the eagle for it would feed on human flesh no more.

The old man coughs, then laughs. My man basks in the warmth that I see is not there. The old man is not pleased with the eagle feathers, not pleased with the boast. The old woman just mutters wordlessly, and I feel the emptiness on my back, and the emptiness in my belly. Suddenly, I feel a shiver of silence.

This night he speaks, his breath on my skin whispers, words strange, awakening words, words to alter dreams, words all through the shivering heat, words panting until I feel my tongue move, but my word is only a screech, quickly smothered by his tongue. In the chill of the new light my belly is bare, unmarked.

I leave him limp on the spruce boughs, leave the shelter, leave the camp, footsteps silent on the dew-wet twigs and leaves. Footsteps led by a tug of emptiness in my belly. There is a heaviness to my footsteps, a reluctance, a forcing that was not there when I followed my father. I was pulled then, drawn. I followed only because my mission was to follow. I could have led.

The cliff lifts my eyes to the ledge where the old man picked up the feathers, dead feathers dropped by the eagles tearing at the tender flesh. The eagles spoke to me then, spoke of flying, soaring, wings spread, circling up up up looking down on the man picking feathers from the dust. No man now, but a raven picking at the three feathery mounds. A whisper of wings and the young eagle glides to its nest, a fish in its beak. I cry out for wings but the eagle just tears at the fish.

I stumble back, pulled to the ground, my moccasins crashing through the sun-dried twigs, a gnawing tickle in my belly, then a draining pain as I sink to the grassy bank of the lake. I feel him stride past me then, the bundle of sinews bloodying the shoulder of his shirt.

I crawl through the grass toward the mountain of flesh, the blood-slashed back of the mammoth, the trunk collapsed on the grass, my self half deflated. But there is still a voice, a minor voice. The sandpiper perches on a crumpled shoulder, excitedly chirping at me telling of the two-leg who told a mouse to dig under the ground to the underbelly of the mammoth, to dig right through the hide of the monster, right to the heart, right to the gusher of blood. The mouse drowned in the flood of blood, as the mammoth collapsed. And how the two-leg danced on the mammoth as he slashed away at the sinews of the back. The sandpiper hops up the slope of meat to the raw slashes and pecks at the bloody flesh.

Again he speaks in the squirming dark, he thrusts his spirit into me, his mouse burrowing to my heart, as I kneel under him, my feet clawing his back, his words in my ears. Words that promise no danger, a world without monsters, and I feel the frog and the grizzly shrinking from his thrusts into my belly and I fear the emptiness to be filled only for him, to be filled only by him.

I follow him from the camp into the grey bush, follow his step silently. Sometimes he glides like a shadow or a cloud. Sometimes he crashes like a moose running. I follow him until the sun is high in the sky. Then he stops and crouches beside a rock. I slip behind some willows and see the five huge frogs sitting on the shore, their eyes as big as fists, their croaking shrill enough to hurt my ears, their tongues powerful enough to catch birds. They are sitting on the finest arrowheads.

I watch him pick up stones. I watch his arm draw back. I see the arm fling stone after stone after stone. The giant frogs leap into the water to seek out the

sound. He yells to them, "May you become part of the water and remain there forever!" Then he gathers up the arrowheads in the place where the largest frog had been sitting and he hurries away. I stare at the water, stare at the huge eyes peeping up over the water's surface, and even as I stare the eyes shrink and disappear. I hear a high croaking sound, faint. I step from the bush. Five tiny frogs leap out of the water, and sit on the spot where the arrowheads were before.

I feel like a dry stick, cracked, ready to break. One frog flicks out a tongue, catches a mosquito. I could squash the frog with my foot. I could pick up the frog and pull off a leg and chew it. Yet I shudder more now than when it could have devoured me!

He is finishing his arrows in front of the shelter when I return with forced steps. The old woman is muttering as she stirs the meat in the caribou pot. The old man talks bravely from a distance as he watches the fine arrowheads being bound to the eagle-feathered shafts with the mammoth sinew. There is a hollowness in his voice. A hollowness wrapped in envious fear. He has been tricked by his own idle boast.

This man holds up his new arrows, strokes the smoothed shafts, balances feather and stone, soft and sharp. I fear the night.

His arrows do not end until in the dim dawn he sinks to the spruce boughs beside me, my ears pierced with the panting of words. I am whimpering, emptying, draining with each breath. I force myself to crawl from the shelter, crawl through the mist of the morning to the shelter of those who gave me life. I enter the opening, crawl in and rise to kneel. The kneeling shape of the old woman huddles beside the stretched form of the old man. All eyes are open, dark pools in circles of wrinkles. I shudder with tears rolling down my still smooth cheeks.

"Why do you cry?" the old man asks, his voice like dry leaves.

"This man," I gasp, "this man is killing my spirits. I have to hold in my dreams."

"The dreams are leaving us."

"He gives me new dreams and I fear I will die. I am an empty hole."

"Is there nothing left that you can use? Is every spirit gone?"

Suddenly I feel a raging inside me. There are still claws in my belly. The grizzly bear.

The old man rises from the bed of spruce boughs. He holds my wrist. His voice now unhollowed. "Go into the bush. Change to the grizzly bear."

My belly growls. I stare at the eyes of the old people. The old man lets go of my wrist. "I will change his arrowheads to chips of wood," he says.

I flee from the shelter, run past the shadow crawling from the shelter of my bed. I run into the bush, my moccasins crashing the dry sticks, my breasts chafing against the caribou hide, his moistness leaving my loins with each step. Then I stumble, fall, and the grizzly bear spirit rages from the dream of my belly and the caribou hide becomes fur and the fingers and toes become claws and I am bounding over the ground landing on the pads of my paws looking for my cubs.

I follow my nose to the smell of him, his seed. I rear up on my hind legs at the edge of the camp, growl with rage, see the old people huddled beside the shelter, the old man grinning warily.

This man stands boldly, his bow drawn, the wood tipped arrow aimed at my heart. I roar and charge, the arrow sings and bounces from my side like a cone of seeds from a tree. He turns to run, readying another arrow. Again the arrow bounces from me. Again and again and again until all the arrows but one are lying harmless on the ground. This man shows me his back and runs into the bush fast as a hare. I crash after him raging at his speed, at his darting, at his circling back to the camp. I rage at his clawing at the ground. I see him fling the wooden arrowhead from the shaft and put the frog arrow in its place, but I fear nothing now and I charge at this man, my husband, killer of my spirits, man who makes the world safe from monsters, safe for men, driver of shafts into my body, hard as stone, soft as feathers, man full of words that leave me silent.

- * *In Dogrib mythology, Yamozha wandered the world making it safe for people. Yamozha also created many of the landscape features in the north. A number of versions of this particular story have appeared in print. The version I used was told by a Menton Mantla of Lac La Martre, North West Territories to Francis Zoe who translated it into English. The reimagining of the story from the young woman's point of view is my own and I accept full responsibility for it.*

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