

More Precious Than a Coyote

May 6, 1999

Nica's dreams had started when she was just thirteen, something she kept secret from almost everyone. They were those type of secrets – shameful, like the brown hues of her skin – ugly and coarse. Her kokum had worked hard to help Nica see beauty in nature (like their backyard garden – the one that seemed larger than life, as cliched as that was) as though that somehow fix the way Nica looked at herself. But Nica couldn't see what her kokum saw, and her dreams reinforced her strangeness.

She wasn't sure why she dreamed of fruits and animals, but she always knew who the animal represented; the fruit, however, was never clear. A week after her first dream, where a rabbit had hopped towards her with a blackberry smooshed on its head – reminding her of a thumbprint – her uncle had passed. During the funeral, her kokum held Nica's forearm tightly. Nica sat in shock, and it wasn't until after the funeral was over – the service, the reception and the feast – that she noticed the bruised imprint of Kokum's hand. Later, after the rest of the family had either left or gone to bed, Nica stood in as a cane for Kokum.

“Kokum.” Nica sat at the foot of the bed, twisting her body so that she could rub her grandma's feet. “Do you ever have dreams that are, I don't know. They don't make any sense but somehow you know they mean something?”

Kokum leaned her head to the side, like an owl twisting its face curiously. Her cheeks were speckled with two dark spots. Nica stared at them and raised a hand to her own cheek, wondering if one day she would have the same speckles.

“Sometimes,” Nica's kokum finally answered, “when I was your age, I used to dream of something that was half-animal, half-human. I remember being so scared because it would

always shift into some new form like it wasn't sure which would terrify me less: an owl with human features or a human with the eyes and talons of an owl. Crazy, eh?"

"And then?" Nica asked.

"It would speak a name, and I'd wake up. Eventually it shifted completely into an owl, and it hasn't changed since," Kokum answered, her voice low and steady like a beating drum.

"You still dream about it?" Nica frowned and chewed her bottom lip.

"Not as often." Kokum chuckled, as Nica's frown deepened. "I control them now. I get a tingling in my toes like they're going numb. When it hurts to walk, I know it's gonna be a bad one. So, I'll ask my spirit-guide to keep the vision from me until I'm ready."

Kokum's eyes closed as Nica massaged her feet; a wheezing snore escaped through her nose. Her kokum had always seemed a little different from the rest of the family, going silent in a busy and loud conversation, eyes focused in on something that wasn't there. Nica could remember her mom's frustration with Kokum. She stared at the picture of a boreal owl sitting on a tree branch – it's eyes barely open – that hung above Kokum's dresser. Wishing was foolish, her mom had told her once, asking was more productive. Nica looked back at Kokum.

"Why do I have this power?" she finally asked, afraid of what Kokum would say. Nica hoped for an answer that made sense of her strangeness. Hoped for some normal possibility. Hoped and wished.

"Our family has always had this power, my mother and her mother, and her mother's mother. Your mother denied her gift from the Creator because she was afraid. But it's not something to be afraid of." Kokum opened her eyes and smiled, the gap in her teeth reminding Nica of an open door. "Our ancestors share their knowledge with us so that we may pass it onto those without the Sight. Nosim, don't ever doubt that your powers are a gift."

Nica frowned. She felt alone even though Kokum was beside her. Even though Nica's mom had the same reservations about their so-called gift. Even more when Kokum called her Nosim; *my grandchild*. Maybe if she didn't talk about her dreams, everyone would be safe. Maybe, somehow, Nica could change it all.

As Kokum fell asleep, Nica hoped that the dream she'd had was fluke. That the power her kokum had wouldn't stay with Nica. That she could somehow deny it the same way her mother had.

July 12, 2019

Breathe, Nica reminded herself, squinting up at the ceiling. She pressed her fingers into her cheekbones. She inhaled, counted, *one, two, three, four*, exhaled for the same count. She could feel her back slick with sweat – in a frantic gesture, she kicked the blankets off her, trying to free herself from their weight. She walked toward the bedroom door.

Brush teeth, check. Wash face, check. Don't close eyes. Too late, Nica's eyes shut, and an image from her dream filled the darkened space inside her mind. A coyote walked towards her, an overflowing pouch of saskatoon berries hung from around its neck. A spotlight followed its movement like a singer on stage. She still didn't believe that her dreams were a gift. They were more like a burden – one she still couldn't carry.

Nica entered the kitchen. Beelining to her coffee machine, she held up the canister of coffee and breathed in. She grabbed milk from the fridge, scrunching her nose as she sniffed the open carton. A pile of dishes teetered like the Tower of Pisa in the sink; she could almost hear her ex's voice reprimanding her.

Despite the slight putrid smell from the milk, Nica decided it was worth the risk for a bowl of Cheerios. Also, she didn't feel like taking a trip to the Superstore down the road, no matter the promise that every till would have a cashier on a Saturday. Besides, driving in the South Edmonton Common centre was frustrating on any given day. Weekends were far worse.

She stood on her tiptoes and grabbed a bowl from a cupboard. The bowl slipped. Nica's hands reached out, a chill scrambling up her back. For a moment, the bowl hovered in the air and Nica quickly cupped it with both hands. She looked out the window at her neighbour's yard across the street, worry filling her. If anyone had seen what she had just done... She could almost hear her mother chiding her – don't use your powers in the open, don't give anyone information they can use. Nica thought back on her childhood.

She wondered if her mother felt ashamed of their family's gifts. Wondered if that feeling was why she left behind the ribbon skirts Kokum had spent hours sewing, the sweet smell of burning sage in the kitchen, Creator, the precious Cree words that Kokum had tried to pass on, and finally leaving Nica and her older brother Bryce alone with Kokum. Nica gently shook her head.

She was onto her fifth spoonful when she heard someone banging on the door. She pushed her chair away from the table. Her dream from the night before told her enough, but that wasn't the only clue. Darren's banging continued.

She found it funny how the people who visited her called her a witch, but when they needed her, she was suddenly a little better than that. A medicine woman was the nicest term she'd heard – also the most correct. When her kokum was alive, their neighbours were respectful, saying how neat it was to have an elder living next door. They loved coming over to their house, loved hearing Kokum laugh and joke with them. Kokum had that way about her

though; she drew people in, her twanged laughter creating a warmth that filled a person from the stubs of their toes to the ends of their hair. Nica didn't have that same way. She was stand-offish, staying inside, away from the pale-skinned people across the street. Those people reminded her of crows cawing and flying around a scarecrow, terrified of her but drawn towards the garden she cared for.

Keeping the door chain in place – Nica had installed it after one such crow barged in – she cracked the door a couple of inches. Darren pushed his foot into the room. Nica wished she was wearing heels so that she could crush his foot, but there was no point. He was supposed to come in. Anyways, who wore heels in their own house?

“I need your help,” Darren pleaded, his widened eyes reminding Nica of an abandoned pet desperate for love and comfort. He was nothing more than a coyote, waiting for the best time to turn on her. Nica wished for what she was sure was the thousandth time that her power would choose someone who deserved it.

“You'll need to remove your foot so I can open my door,” she said. He nodded, and she removed the chain.

He ran a hand through his dull brown hair – still long, to his shoulders – following her into the kitchen where she sat back down and took another large spoonful of soggy Cheerios. Nica gestured for him to sit, but he leaned against the counter with his arms crossed. His cheeks tightened as she swallowed noisily, his mouth a receding seam. She'd have to toss her cereal, start the conversation.

Darren's shoulders flexed, his elongated neck reminding her of a giraffe. He was never the relaxing type. His hazel-brown eyes narrowed as his body shifted away from the counter. She looked out the window at Mrs. Prince who was weeding her front yard across the street, even the

ones that grew in the cracks of the sidewalk. Mrs. Prince stood straight and faced Nica's home. Her mouth pursed. Nica thought about sticking her tongue out, but Darren's presence kept her from reacting.

They had been close once, sort of. She had longed for that type of togetherness that Bryce and Darren had but she could never tell Darren the truth about who she was even when they were dating, keeping him farther than arms-length. Bryce and Darren used to play paintball when they were younger, but after Bryce's death, Darren pulled away from her and her kokum. Nica hadn't been surprised. Now as Darren stood waiting for her, Nica wished she hadn't said a word.

"What can I do for you?" She scooped a last spoonful of cereal – one of the cheerios looked as if it was about to fall to its death, bloated – opening her mouth wide. Darren looked away; his mouth tight. Nica remembered this expression years ago, just before he broke up with her.

The coffee pot sputtered – it was almost full. Nica stood up and pulled down her favourite mug from the cupboard above the coffee machine.

"I wondered where that mug went." Darren's voice was stiff; each syllable slow and specific. Nica set the mug down and poured the tarred liquid. She dusted cinnamon powder on top, then set the container back beside the canister.

"What do you want Darren?" Nica took a sip of coffee, not bothering to offer any.

Darren kept glaring at the mug in her hands. Nica knew she should have given the mug back to him after they first broke up, but his leaving had been abrupt and afterwards Nica hadn't felt like giving it back. That, and it was the perfect size. She cleared her throat, hoping Darren would say something. He looked up, his mouth becoming even thinner until it was just a poorly drawn squiggle.

“I need your help.”

Nica narrowed her eyes as Darren looked towards the dirty dishes. His body shifted; his hands reached to grab a dish from the pile.

“Well, I don’t want you doing dishes as payment.” Nica lifted the mug to her mouth, hiding that she was biting her lip, and hoped that he hadn’t noticed. He still had the ability to make her nervous. No, not nervous, just uncomfortable. She’d close in on herself like a large rock covering the entrance of a cave whenever Darren scrutinized something in disarray. “Just tell me what you want.”

Darren exhaled, his arms uncrossing, and he shoveled a hand through his hair. “I got some bad news from my doctor yesterday.”

“And you think I can help?” Nica asked, her eyes narrowing as he looked down at the floor. Anywhere but her.

“You’re not exactly who I wanted help from.” His voice low and quiet, but somehow his tone still bit into her.

“Wow. You still know how to make me feel special.”

“Please. You’re the only one who can help.” For the first time, Darren stared at her without any judgement or enmity. Nica closed her eyes and held her breath.

The pouch of saskatoon berries flashed in her mind. She set her mug down and walked over to the pantry cupboard where she kept a tin of tobacco and an empty leather pouch. She scooped some of the tobacco into the pouch and walked out of the kitchen, gesturing for Darren to follow her. They walked past her kokum’s old bedroom – now nothing more than a storage unit – towards the back patio. On the wall beside the patio door, hung a bunch of blue, white and turquoise ribbons; a braid of sweetgrass laid on top of the side table underneath. Both meant for

protection, but Nica never felt safe when Darren was near. Not that he had ever threatened her. He had been the perfect boyfriend, until her powers had pushed him away.

November 2, 2003

Nica and Darren had been dating for almost nine months before everything went wrong. Their 'dates' were always on the weekends though Darren wanted more than just an evening hanging out in Kokum's kitchen. Nica concentrated on her homework only ever aware of Darren because of his hand squeezing hers. Bryce hadn't been happy about his little sister dating his best friend, but Nica had felt determined to have a normal life and Darren was normal with his family dinners, and his curfew. She ignored the dreams causing her insomnia, drank too many energy drinks during the day, and drew dying flowers and graves in the margins of her school notes during classes to keep herself awake.

"You okay there?" Darren squeezed her hand gently. His dark eyebrows creased in concern, his mouth not quite thin enough to be upset, but Nica knew that line was coming. She blinked; her eyelids closed for a second too long. "Seriously? You're gonna just take one of your micro-naps to avoid answering me?"

Nica opened her eyes. The horse crushing an apple with a swollen leg on a paved road last night was a clear sign of what was to come, but she hadn't expected it so soon.

"I'm sorry. I didn't sleep last night," she answered quietly.

Darren shifted; his eyes narrowed as he drank his coffee. He had brought his favourite mug to the house, determined to feel like he was part of the family. Nica looked down at her chemistry notes. She had tried telling him that their 'date' was probably a bad idea, that she

needed to study for a quiz, but he had insisted on keeping their date. He had taken a gap year, so they could remain close. Nica wished he hadn't.

“I don't understand you,” he said, his voice tensing as his mouth thinned into that disapproving line, “I could be pursuing a degree right now at Simon Fraser. I chose to stay here with you, so that we could attend together.”

Nica chewed on her bottom lip just enough so that he wouldn't notice. She never knew what to say when he started talking about university and how much he was missing. When he graduated in June, Nica had tried pushing him to move – she had wanted him gone before he realized that a relationship with her was never going to work. They were too different. He and his family fit the mold of their neighbours and his lighter skin helped him blend into the crowd. She didn't fit in his world and she was never going to no matter how hard she wished. Nica blinked; tears formed, and she tried to take them back, but they escaped her hold and rolled down her cheeks. Darren's hand tightened around hers.

But then Bryce walked into the kitchen, messing Darren's hair. He ignored Nica – who slipped her hand out of Darren's suddenly loosened hold – and grabbed a glass of water. Bryce sat down and propped his elbow on the table, leaning far enough to block Nica from Darren's view. He took a long sip, slurping loudly.

“Yo! We gotta have another round of paintball before I go back to school.” Bryce playfully punched Darren's shoulder. He didn't notice Nica wiping her eyes, or Darren's red imprinted hand wrapped around hers.

“A little late for that Bryce.” Darren laughed. “Don't you have class tomorrow?”

“Eh. It’s no biggie. I was planning on skipping anyways.” Bryce grinned. He had come back for Kokum, like he had for the last two months, determined to have as many memories of her as he could. Nica was less worried. Somehow, she knew that Kokum wasn’t leaving her yet.

As Bryce looked over at Nica – she quickly dropped her hand to her lap – she couldn’t help but remember the limping horse. For a moment, Nica longed to pull Bryce into a firm hug – keep him from leaving her behind. Darren’s voice muted into the background as Bryce frowned. She looked away. The two kept talking as though Nica was no longer in the room. She stood up and left them, turning around to watch Bryce’s animated face laugh at something Darren had said. Their contagious laughter reminded her of Kokum’s, twanging together like wolves howling – Nica wished she could join in.

July 12, 2019

Nica didn’t like thinking about her past or the mistakes she had made. She rubbed the leather pouch in-between her fingers as Darren followed her outside. He passed her and walked to the edge of the stairs. His left hand reached into his pocket, the other running through his hair. Nica moved towards him, passing through the small space he left between himself and the patio bannister.

She pressed forward, towards the two large trees standing on either side of her garden. The paint on the fence was peeling and Nica made a mental note to buy a new can. She looked back. Darren stood still on the patio steps, staring out into the yard.

“Coming?” she asked. He had to choose to follow her. Otherwise she would never be able to help him. She waited, wanting to reach out but he was like one of those feral dogs or cats

that would snap at your hand – or worse. It seemed as though he would never move, and a small part of Nica hoped that he'd turn around and walk away.

He didn't. Breathing deeply – Nica watched his chest rise and fall – Darren walked down the steps. He stalked past her. She followed slowly, letting him lead. The yard was larger, much larger than her neighbor's and if anyone asked, Nica would repeat Kokum's words in the same low tone: "Just one of Creator's gifts, I guess." Nica caught up to Darren waiting outside of the fenced enclosure, staring up at the trees. She smiled softly.

Darren opened the gate for her, and while she wished he wouldn't have, Nica appreciated the small act of kindness. She passed him, pushing down the desire to place her hand on his. Once she was through, Nica knew exactly where she needed to go. Northwind switch grass grazed her hands, pushing her further into the garden. Darren followed, trying to keep up.

The garden wasn't really a garden. The fence only bordered along the two trees, with a mixture of perennials and ferns growing in the lined pots on the left side of the gate. The rest of garden grew in chaos – lilies scattered amongst a mixture of saskatoon bushes – just as Nica's mother had lived, moving from one town to the next, her children safe with Kokum. A world where the spirits were free to grow how they wanted.

She stepped past the cluster of saskatoon bushes, one of her hands reaching out to pick some berries. She slipped them into her mouth, the juice spreading across her tongue as she chewed. They were ripe and ready to fill tart and pie shells. Nica closed her eyes, envisioning the dark indigo sauce filling the tart, topped with spiralled whipped cream, her feet still moving forward. Her mouth watered.

"I forgot your backyard was this big." Darren's voice made Nica stop and her eyes opened. "It's like another world out here."

Turning around, she watched him grab a handful of berries. He threw his head back, releasing them into his mouth. Nica's hand slipped back into her pocket, rubbing against the pouch. Pulling it out, a tingling sensation enveloped her. The grass was unnaturally dormant, yet Nica felt something pulling on her hair. She twisted back around, walking past the strawberry bushes and seedlings.

“Come on, I know what you need now,” she said.

Nica found the plant quickly: the devil's-club. She had travelled to BC one year – where the plant grew in masses and the Medicine People of the region praised its uses – and sowed the plant into her own garden where it struggled to multiply. But the image of Darren eating the saskatoon berries had been enough to point her towards what he needed. After she pulled the plant from the soil, Nica knelt down and pulled out the leather pouch of tobacco to give thanks and ask for the earth's blessing. Her kokum had passed on as much knowledge as she could before she died, telling her that their grandfathers and grandmothers would guide Nica the rest of the way.

She led Darren back to the house and told him to return in seven days. He begrudgingly left, and Nica hung the devil's-club to dry in the kitchen. On the seventh morning, she poured a gallon of water into a large pot, added the devil's-club, and brought the liquid to a rolling boil. She watched it simmer for almost thirty minutes and as the mixture cooled, she wrote down directions for Darren. She poured the tea into a glass container and covered it.

Darren arrived ten minutes later as though Nica had called him with her mind. As she passed him the container, she repeated her directions: he had to drink four times a day until it was all gone, and most importantly, he needed to pray and ask for the plant to work. He nodded

as though he understood. She wanted to say more as he opened her front door. But nothing came out.

A week later, saskatoon tarts were on the menu for dessert – her ice cream bucket filled– but all Nica could think of was the coyote that had returned to her dreams the night before, no pouch in sight, but a deep blue stained handprint pressed into the top of its front left paw. She looked down at her watch, walking back to the house when she saw the small hand land on the number nine.

Before she had even reached the patio door, Nica could hear Darren’s banging. She set the bucket down on the deck and walked into the house. She unlocked the door, taking a few steps back.

He pushed his way in. His eyebrows creased together; his eyes narrowed into sharp darts. His hands rolled into fists as Nica backed into the kitchen. She glanced worriedly out the window, Mrs. Prince weeding her yard once again as though no time had passed at all.

“What the hell was your potion-shit supposed to do?” He shouted.

Nica chewed on her bottom lip and knew what she had to do. What she should have done years ago.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I thought the devil’s-club would work.”

“That’s not good enough.” Darren’s voice trembled. “I don’t want an apology. I need you to use your goddamn powers and fix it.”

Nica shook her head. “My powers don’t work that way.”

“Right. I forgot.” He looked up at the ceiling. “You only use your powers for yourself.”

Nica closed her eyes. If she could go back in time, she would. She'd go back and tell Darren what was going to happen. Tell him that there was nothing they could do, no matter how hard they tried. Tell him that sometimes the only thing you could do was accept the life you were given.

"I can't change what's going to happen." She took a step toward him. "If I do, then someone else will take your place."

"I don't care."

"Yes, you do," Nica said, wanting to reach her hand out and pull his body to hers.

"Please, don't make the mistake I made all those years ago."

Darren's body hunched together, and he sat down in the chair. He didn't put his head in his hands – no, he was always much stronger than Nica had given him credit. She looked outside at Mrs. Prince who had stopped weeding. Nica thought about waving with a big smile on her face but decided against it. She looked back at Darren, his hands clasped so tightly that red imprints formed.

"I'm not ready." He stared at the stove, but his eyes were out of focus. Maybe if Nica had told him about the dream she'd had about the horse, and what that meant for Bryce and for them. Maybe if she told him about the coyote with the smooshed handprint on its paw and what that meant for him. But it was too late. There was no saving her brother from the car accident, just like there had been no saving their relationship. Her visions weren't meant to save people.

"I know," she said, daring to reach her hand out for his shoulder, "I can help ease your pain if you want, but you have to pray for the medicine to help."

He looked at her hand, his eyes still vacant but slowly waking up. He stood up, causing her to step back, and walked to her front door. She walked over with him, holding the door open as he stood outside.

For a moment, Nica thought that maybe they could go back to save Bryce and their relationship. Darren's face was different outside, reminding her of before. Before everything changed between them, before they were even boyfriend and girlfriend. Before when Darren was simply Bryce's best friend. And yet, there was something familiar. Nica stepped out onto the front step. She longed to experience that difference with him, to step into a togetherness that they had never had, that she had kept far away. She let that longingness fill her, and she breathed in deeply, as the warmth from the sky filled her. Nica could feel it move from her feet towards her arms, and hands. Once it reached her fingertips, she blinked her eyes shut, her mind filled with the image of a coyote – grey hair stained with the indigo sauce of saskatoons – limping towards her, then lying down. It didn't get up again.

“Go home, Darren.” Her voice sounded strange, even to herself. She opened her eyes and watched as Darren walked towards his car. He turned around, just before he opened the car door, slightly raising his hand. She nodded once.

As he drove away, Nica thought about her kokum and Bryce. She felt a warmth around her shoulders, as though there were two hands rubbing it gently and she exhaled. For the first time, Nica didn't feel so alone.