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# *Preface*

I remember the People of the Rapids, the northern-most Anishinabeg (Ojibway). They were tough and self-reliant, but they laughed a lot. Sometimes they kidded each other roughly, especially when they were cold or hungry, which was quite often.

Their winters were too long and their hills too stony for primitive agriculture. They depended for their lives on the shifting patterns of fish and game that were sometimes inexplicably plentiful and again faded into nothing.

When the deer and the rabbits disappeared, the wolves and the lynxes starved. And then, if the ice froze too deep for netting, men, women and children knew the horror of famine.

That suffering showed in the legends. Punishment came down on those who failed to respect the animals they hunted, or who killed more meat than they could eat or save. Virtue was rewarded with a shower of fish, rather than of gold, as in European fairy tales. In a bad winter, skull-faced Windigo, the specter of cannibalism, prowled through the spruce at the edge of the clearing. But always, there were the clowns and the laughter.

Old men and old women made certain that these stories did not die, but were continued on through the young to those not yet born. In this way they preserved remembrance and pride in achievements of the ancestors, the ancient wisdom and bitter humor of the subarctic forest, and a code of behavior that had to be followed, without the pressure of reward or punishment, if the people were to survive.

During some seasons two or more families would live together in one lodge. Almost everybody witnessed, in early childhood, sex, birth, occasional violence between men, undernourishment, sickness and death. These events, familiar, but still awesome and mysterious, were important in their folktales.

When I asked to hear more of the old legends I was referred to Grandma Wadikwan. There seemed to be no limit to her supply.

The old lady told her stories in lively, informal words, keeping their basic structures unchanged while she added embellishments of her own. She acted out some parts and accompanied others with gestures, her hands swaying in the smoky firelight. She spoke in a low, masculine voice for a man and higher for a woman. As she talked, she would sometimes fashion little figures of grass, sticks, or bark and move them to illustrate the action.

She spoke freely of bodily parts, wastes, and functions. Nobody was embarrassed or offended at the mention of such cosmic essentials.

She drew only vague lines between men and animals, natural and supernatural. A character might wander back and forth across those lines leaving the listeners uncertain as to whether this was human or something else.

She didn't explain the meanings, some simple, some profound, that were hidden in the stories. These were secret things that each person had to search out for himself.

But she had a fine feeling for the effective pause. At the proper moment she would put the pipe back in her mouth and sit with hands folded, watching the faces of her audience. When she judged that they understood and appreciated her meaning, she would continue.

In retelling these tales I have used drawings in place of the grandmother's gestures, lay figures, and pantomime. I can't give you the timed delays nor the hand- and smoke-work. In other respects I will try to pass the stories along in the same way that she did, but in present-day language and idiom.

The forest people have it easier now. They are multiplying and fattening under the protection of the welfare state. No more sunken-eyed children with bloated bellies.

But something of the old life, something important, is missing. It has disappeared, like a decorated basket that is laid on

blazing logs to writhe, blacken, and be gone, leaving just the pungent smoke of birch-bark and porcupine-quill embroidery.

I hope that these stories will give some understanding of the woods Indians that I knew—men and women with the wit and courage to survive whenever survival was possible, and, when it was not, to laugh a little, and then to die quietly, without self-pity, like the wolves and the deer.

J. L. P.