Wendigo

A Short Story from an Idea by Erin

By Maryanne Peters

Maybe it was a bear, maybe it was a wendigo like the old Indian said. Whatever the beast had been, it left Ansel Georges more dead than alive.

The Indians who heard his cries and found him might have left him to bleed out were it not for the wound. The group of three was a witch doctor named Kupeyak and his two assistants, out gathering herbs. That would have been Ansel’s good fortune. Here were people who could tend to his wound and had the material to do so. But why would they?

The chief on the Cree had always said: “Play no part in the lives of the white people.” That would mean leave him to die.

“But this seems to be the legend made real,” said Kupeyak to his followers. “The legend speaks of the beautiful yellow haired woman who will slay the wendigo and free us from that evil. For this is a female wendigo and no man can kill it.”

One said: “But this is not a woman, master.

“This is not a man,” said Kupeyak. “The beast has clawed away his manhood. I have always wondered how a woman would have the strength to do battle with a wendigo, but now I understand. Here is somebody with strength, as I can see in these limbs. If she is now made woman, she may fulfil the prophecy.”

In any event, it seemed worth the effort to try. They could dress the wound and later, when Ansel was carried back to the village on a litter, the witch doctor could attend to repairing the damage as best he could.

Ansel saw all this pass in a haze of pain, and with no real understanding of the language of those people. But that would pass. The pain would die away and his knowledge of their tongue would grow. Still, it took him time to understand why he must live as a squaw in the village.

The chief said that he doubted Kupeyak, but that he had insufficient knowledge of the spirit world so he would bow to the expert.

“Because I am told that you have value, Woman,” he said to Ansel. “You may live among us and attend to female tasks.”

As he healed Ansel learned that he was now like the other women in that he needed to squat to piss. The women also made sure that his body was polished clean and that his growing hair was cared for and braided. They fed him herbs that they said would soften him and make him appear more female.

Kupeyak watched over all of this.

“I have had a premonition,” he told Ansel. “You will leave our village and you will return to the world of the white man and live among them as a woman. But the wendigo will find you and It will die at your hands. Without understanding it, the creature has made you instrument of its own death, which was another part of the legend.

Was it a wendigo that slashed his groin those years before? Ansel thought that it was a bear. The wendigo has the body of a man, the claws of a bare, and the horns of a stag upon its head. It seemed like nonsense to Ansel, but he said no such thing.

He had thought of little but survival for the first month, then he had made friends among the women and had become one of them. He had learned to understand that he could no longer function as a man, and for the Indians he was happy enough to be a woman, but he always assumed that when the time came to leave he would cut his hair and return to life as a man, albeit a lesser man than others.

Changes in his body would make this future difficult, but still when Kupeyak forecast life as woman among his own kind he quietly scoffed at it.

Some weeks after the premonition Kupeyak returned to the village after a week away carrying a package. In it there was the clothing a white woman – drawers, slip, a corset, petticoats, hose and a dress that was colorful and well made, but sightly used.

“I traded skins for these things,” said Kupeyak. “Tomorrow you will leave our village and return to your own world. The women will help to prepare you.”

They did their best but they had only see white women at a distance. In the end the braids were removed from Ansels log blonde hair so that it cascaded down his back in waves from the braids, and the dressed his brow as they thought was the fashion for white women they had seen.

He rode behind Kupeyak side saddle into a town that he had never been before. Kupeyak led him straight to the Sherriff’s office, and helped him down. Some townsfolk had seen the Indian and the golden-haired woman ride in and they assembled nearby.

Whatever Ansel may have planned he saw something that made him stop, and change his plans. On the wall outside the Sherriff’s office were some wanted posters including one that read: “Wanted, Ansel Georges, for Cattle Rustling, Reward for his person or an identifiable corpse”. The sketch was bad. Ansel could see his reflection in the pane of glass next to the board. The woman that he saw looked nothing like the man.

He was no rustler but he had mixed with some bad men. One of them may well have accused him of the crime, and in this territory it was a serious one. “Or an identifiable corpse”.

The door opened and the Sherriff stepped out, drawn by the group assembling.

“Sherriff, I found this woman, as if fallen from the sky,” said Kupeyak in perfect English that Ansel had never heard him speak before.

“Good afternoon Miss,” said the Sherriff. I expect that there are folks looking for you. What is your name?”

“An,” he said. “Anne. Anne Russell.” The voice was as the women of the village had taught her – like a song in tones above those a man would sing in.

“So how do you come to be with the Indians?” asked the Sheriff. The assembled onlookers wanted to know too.

“I … I don’t know exactly,” said Anne. “Kupeyak has looked after me. He bought me these clothes. He found me … the day before yesterday.” The story was being pulled from some recess in the brain, as could best be done there on the porch. “Sheriff, could I please step inside and sit down? Perhaps a glass of water?”

“You will leave our village and you will return to the world of the white man and live among them as a woman”. Kupeyak was not allowed to follow her inside. His duty was to save his people from the wendigo in accordance with the prophecy and his dream. He smiled and rode out of town - after selling to pony and buying some items.

Anne Russell would add to her story over time, but always leave room for mystery. She learned that she was attractive, and that mystery made her more attractive. That counted because she found herself without the skills to work anywhere but the saloon, although more than once she was called upon to use her knowledge of the Indian tongue.

The only skill she had was how to be a squaw, but a squaw needs a man, as she had learned in the Indian village. And she was scarred, and unable to have sex as a normal woman could, and unable to bear children. But she had learned among the Indians how all these problems could be overcome, provided that the right man would have her.

Not that anybody knew her secret. She had no need to tell. The word got around that Anne Russell was good fun – she could ride a horse, shoot a pistol and play cards like a man, she was as pretty as a picture and would stroke your cock for a dollar and suck it for two, but there was no going further. Anne Russell was saving that for matrimony.

In those days a dollar was a lot of money. Not so many were paying, but those who were got what they wanted and she got that too. And there were offers of marriage too, from those who had a taste, or she of them, and they wanted more.

Anne must have assumed that there was no man for her. After all, she was not a woman, so why should there be a man.

But as it happened, there was a man, and he was from that very town, or close to it. Roy Allardice had a ranch some way out of town and he had no need to visit the town while his wife was alive. She was buried on the ranch only days after Anne Russell had “fallen from the sky”. Roy had his hands full with there four children, although they were all now of an age that his constant attention was no longer necessary.

Roy was not a man to call upon saloon girls in any event. But he had heard that there was a woman working there who spoke the language of the Indian people and he was wishing to consult with the tribe as to his damming of the river that flowed through his property and then into their land.

“That would be Anne Russell,” said the Sheriff. “She works at the saloon, but she is no whore. She is a lady that woman. Striking appearance. Strong but fair. Hair shines like the sun. Can handle a gun too. Bucks no nonsense. Keeping herself for the right man. If I wasn’t married myself, I would try to be that man.”

Roy was curious. Who would not be having heard a woman described like that? He went over to the saloon. He saw her before she was pointed out to him. She slapped a man who was getting too familiar. She slapped him hard.

“Yeah, that’s Anne,” the bartender said. “One hell of a woman”.

“My name is Roy Allardice,” he went straight over to her and thrust out his hand, as was his custom. She looked at it and smiled. “I need your help Miss, and I am ready to pay.”

She took his hand. She was glad that he did not put it to his mouth as some men did. She considered a filthy and overly forward gesture. This man shook it without squeezing it. She liked him then and there.

“If my morals and my scruples allow, I will help you as best I can,” she said.

They sat and shared a drink to discuss details. He was a man who would seek out the people affected by his project, white or Indian he saw no difference. He was that kind of man and they were few on the frontier. But the Indian people she knew and loved them in her own way. Of course, she would talk with them. Of course she would mediate provided that their way of life would not be disturbed.

“It will take a few days,” said Roy. “You may need leave from this place. Before we meet the Indians, you should come up to my ranch and see why I need the water, and the plans I have drawn. Then we should ride up to the site of the dam, in the high forest, before we go down the other side to talk to the Indians.”

“I will need to get some riding clothes,” she said.

“If you will permit me Miss, my late wife was the same size and shape as you and I have discarded none of her belongings so that may assist you.”

“You may call me Anne,” she said. So, he did.

She was up for the adventure. She had come to enjoy the company of men from a new perspective, but she longed to feel the air upon her face and the power of a well-muscled horse between her legs. She rode out to the ranch that very afternoon in her fancy dress and dined with the family of Roy Allardice before considering the plans he had laid out.

Roy had two boys and two girls. The oldest boy was 16 and the oldest girl 14, and both had taken on adulthood early as children must upon the death of a parent. The younger two were their care, but not because their father was not there for all of them.

She bathed and slept in more comfort that she had ever known in that house. It was a place she might call home, as she later did. But there was much to happen before that.

The clothes of the late Mrs. Roy Allardice were a good fit. The corsetry demanded of a saloon girl costume seemed to have shaped her body so that simple but stout underclothing could work, with pants in the shape of a split skirt and a matching jacket, both with embroidered detail indicating a woman of class and refinement.

There was also a belt to go around with a sidearm – a light 5 shot revolver.

“In case of an angry squirrel?” she asked Roy.

“Here is something bigger it can hold it at arm’s length,” said Roy. But she could, so she carried that instead.

They rode out mid-morning, side by side and talking across the fields where he ran his stock, and then single file up into the woods talking less, but still learning about one another.

It seemed to Anne that she had never shared a conversation with another human being like that day riding together. A man on the trail needs to know nothing about the man beside except that he will do his job, and be there if things go wrong. A squaw stays silent, except among other squaws where the talk is of no account, a saloon girl may chatter and be quick with a smart quip, but none of any of that was conversation. Anne realized that something had been missing in her entire life: True companionship.

So it seemed natural that she should volunteer the information about her injuries to him in the course of their time, even though she had never spoken about it to another soul – not even Kupeyak who had stitched her up. The topic of motherhood may have come up, and Anne sadly recounted that because of a bear attack she was without the form of a woman between the legs.

“It is the woman between the ears that concerns me,” said Roy.

“Are you talking about my face, Sir?” Anne accused with a smile.

“That is a wonderful thing, for sure,” he said. “but I was talking about your brain and the good person that it reveals to me you are.”

“But you don’t know me? The truth is that I barely know myself. I fell from the sky, don’t you know? But before then, who was I?”

“It is only who you are now that concerns me, Anne,” he said. “And this is the site of the dam, so we will stop here and camp where I have built a small shelter.”

The shelter was of rocks and a logs roof but was open in the front. It overlooked a gorge that the river passed through so that it could easily be blocked to create a large lake. At that height the water could be channeled or piped across the arid parts of the farm. It would turn a productive ranch into a highly productive farm, as it would in time.

“Who am I now, then Roy?” she asked him as she took the saddle from her horse and tethered him to a tree. She was busy with that when he came up behind her.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said. “I only know that I barely slept a wink last night for thinking about you.” She turned around. He was so close to her she could feel his breath on her smooth soft face.

“Roy, I am not a whole person …”. She had no time to finished. His lips silenced hers and it was a joyous moment for both of them.

That shelter will be forever a place of love for them, despite what happened later that night, for that is where they lay together and explored one another for the first time. There they found a way to have sexual relations with one another that would thrill them both that night, and for so many nights after that.

But was it the wendigo like the old Indian said? Was it the same creature that attacked Ansel Georges and left him for dead? What are the chances? In truth the two sites were close enough – just a valley or two. Had the creature been watching as the fire died and the two people behind the fire under the shelter of the log roof, rolled and bucked and screamed in ecstasy into the still night of the mountain forest?

The Indians say that it is so. The Indians say that wendigos are cunning whereas a mere bear has little thought in its mighty head.

But it must have been the fear of fire that held the creature back until they were both asleep. And then it was upon them, and Roy was the first to stand and take the first strike from that huge clawed hand, sending him reeling.

Then she was face to face with it. There was still enough in the embers to cast up a red light so that the face seemed unlike any bear; and the shadows or branches of the trees behind it looked like the antlers of a wendigo; and the eyes were supernatural in the crimson glow.

For Anne it seemed that everything that Kupeyak told her would happen was happening. She was face to face with the creature but it was so much taller than her, looking down on her as if she was that angry squirrel. But she had discarded that small weapon, and what she held in her hand she brought forward and as the creature roared at her she brought the muzzle to a spot under his jaw and squeezed the trigger.

Hers was now a woman’s hand so it could not hold the weapon through that shot and it crashed to the ground, but the bullet found the creature’s brain and exploded it. The wendigo crashed back dead.

Anne Russell rushed across to her man. His face carried the scar of the beast upon it, but she was able to staunch the bleeding. The scar would remain, just as hers had on her abdomen. She would say that it made him more attractive.

They looked at the carcass in the morning.

“Your shot blew the antlers clean off,” he said. “Or it is just a very big bear.”

“The antlers must be those above the fireplace at home,” she said. She had called the ranch home, as she would forever, but he heard it too, and he smiled warmly, because he knew.

“That can be out trophy,” he said. “We can ride down to the Indian village and tell them that they can come here to collect the skin if they like.”

So, they left that place and left the body of the beast. They rode down the other side of the valley to the Indian village. They met with the tribe and told Kupeyak what they had done in the place above where Roy wanted to build the dam. The tribe agreed on the basis that water would be shared in dry times, which is what Roy had intended.

Kupeyak and some others went to the place and were happy to take the skin as their half of the trophy. They danced and cleansed and blessed that place and freed themselves of a curse. Never again would a wendigo appear in the land of the Cree, although rumors persist.

But that is how Wendigo Lake got its name and how it is still sacred to the Indian people of the Cree Nation. The waters of that lake brought nothing but good fortune to Roy Allardice and his family, which of course came to include his second wife Anne and so many grandchildren that it is hard to keep count.

The End

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