Boreal

Everything we are afraid of has already happened.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Akiden Boreal*

We arrived as the great ice fields retreated, seedlings sprouting against the odds. The world felt new, slow growth everywhere, hope everywhere. When the first people came, we shared our gifts, our medicine, our very skin. But the sharing turned to taking and the people took and took everything they could use from us, from the ground, from beneath the ground, from the water, from the air. We sprouted in the discarded logs and rotten tree limbs of our fallen brothers.

The people backed off for a while. We kept time. We shed our leaves with the cold, sucked it up over the long winter, sap suspended in our veins. In the spring, we were full of life and new leaves.

Now again it is not peaceful. People come with their tents and equipment, their dogs; they speak loudly, and the foxes and deer hold their breath in the underbrush. We love these rude visitors though, and they seem to love us in return. But they still cut us down. A cabin here, a road there, a dam here, a supply post there. We are not infinite.

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The map maker labours long into the night tracing the edge of the Boreal on the ancient stereo plotter, then gathers pens to ink the topography. Pale green like the underbelly of a woodfern in spring for marshes, blue as a summer sky for hills, magenta for the hardscape infrastructure installed by the province. He notes that the boundaries have shrunk yet again. This must be his third major update in a decade.

The map maker remembers the original survey, walking the Manito Miikana trail with Edie, the views of the Pic River and its dunes to the North, glimpses of Lake Superior to the west. He had surveyed most of the great unbroken swathe of the boreal forest; back then it ran from the Labrador coast to the Alaskan out islands dotting the Bering Sea. But this stretch of Pukwaska was special to him. He and Edie had been newly married on that first survey, and they had camped and canoed and watched the constellations late into the night, the forest's embrace all around. The work felt easy going with lots of landmarks and clearings in which to make camp. Every so often they would stumble upon a half-cave made from cobble and stone – a Pukwaska Pit, shelter for long-dead Biigtigong Nishnaabeg hunters and their families. The ruined structures are off-limits now, but the map maker remembers the haven they provided when the weather turned. Storms could descend in a matter of seconds if the gods of Superior were moody. No GPS back then, no photogrammetry, no satellite images – they mapped from the ground, step by step, 58 paces per 100 metres. Compasses and trail ribbons and their eyes the only technology.

Groves of yellow birch and cedar filtered the sunlight, dappling the empty trails. The map maker can still taste the birch sap, the minty crunch and root beer aftermath of tender twigs snapped off as he and his wife moved along the mossy forest floor. He can still smell the cedar, pungent, specific, even as he putters around his home office in the wee hours, recalibrating and re-contouring the shrinkage. Upstairs, Edie sleeps on, oblivious, dreaming.

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"Hey, mister map maker!" Chief Duncan always greets him this way. Claps him on the back and throws him off-balance for a second or two. "What's the matter? You

been drinkin'?" The map maker grins and pulls a base map from the plastic cylinder he carries everywhere slung over a shoulder.

"Look at this. I added in the trail around Halfway Lake." He unrolls the map on the big board room table, weighting the corners with discarded mugs of cold coffee and a three-hole punch. Duncan leans over and follows the map maker's finger tracing the route from Hattie Cove to the lake and around. "Bimose Kinoomagawan," he mutters, half under his breath. But the trail is clearly labelled in English: "Halfway Trail".

"I think it's better if we keep the English place names," says the map maker after a while, taking notice of Chief Duncan's thoughtfulness. "I mean the map is for tourists, right? They'll need the English."

There is silence in the boardroom. Outside, tree branches bend and shake in the early autumn wind. Every once in a while, they scratch at the tall boardroom windows making a tapping sound.

"We could add some interpretative signage. How about plaques for each of the seven grandfather teachings?"

"So, like the stations of the cross?"

"Well, kind of. Love, respect, bravery, truth, honesty, humility, and wisdom. The story of your people."

There is more silence. It's always like this, thinks the map maker. The Chief says nothing; I have no idea what he is thinking. Long pauses. Nothing gets decided.

Eventually Duncan sighs and wonders, "What about using both English and Anishinaabemowin?"

"The problem with Anishinaabemowin," the map maker quickly says, "is its complexity. It's just unpronounceable for most tourists. So many letters, the words are so long."

Chief Duncan nods. The trees tap at the windows. The minutes go by.

"How is Edie doing?" Chief Duncan asks finally. This polite enquiry typically signals the end of the meeting.

"Better these days," says the map maker. "We're trying out a new treatment called immunotherapy. It's been promising for some people. How is your family doing?"

"Everyone is well. Angel has gone off to university in London. She wants to be an engineer."

"She'll always have work," says the map maker.

The two shake hands solemnly. They'll meet again in a few months and move the project forward again incrementally. But it will be years before this map is completed. In the end, Anishinaabemowin place names will appear in tiny script below the English. Chief Duncan will half-triumph, winning a small concession for his people.

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The map maker picks up the brochure for the shrinking provincial park. Tomorrow he will mock up a new draft containing the reduced trails map and a new feature box as requested by the Ministry. Their latest directive makes new rules about mandatory pre-trip orientation sessions for back country travellers. Going forward, anyone wanting to hike the Manito Miikana will have to register and pay a usage fee. Too many people getting lost on purpose, the map maker figures. They set up camp and try to live off the land when they're priced out of the cities and towns.

Just as an exercise the map maker calculates the latest shrinkage, estimating the number of trees lost to the new housing division on the road north to the Ring of Fire. A thousand this time? Two thousand? Housing, yes, I guess housing is needed, is a priority, the map maker thinks. The idea catches at his heart, and he pauses. This forest has housed him, but it is not housing. Can that be right? What will happen when it's all gone? The map maker has been convinced for a while now that the day will eventually come, and he hopes not to see it. He doesn't mention his updates and revisions to Edie anymore. He works at night when the house is quiet and then spends mornings with his wife, watching her dwindle like the Boreal, inexorably, permanently.

He puts down his tools and wipes his eyes. Enough. He turns off the lights and dims the electric fireplace and carefully heads upstairs to Edie. Soon he will

dream alongside her, a dream of yellow birch and moss, of clear breezes and a future full of love and promise.