

*What You Carry: draft 9*

A Play

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts (Special Case)

in

Theatre

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By

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An earlier draft of *What You Carry* was read as part of the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre's Spring Festival of New Plays on 12 May 2016, directed by Roy Surette, with Kent Allen as Walter, Jaron Francis as Gary, Arron Naytowhow as Joseph, and Abbey Thiessen as Margaret. Nina Lee Aquino was the festival dramaturge.

A new draft of *What You Carry* was read at the Regina Playwrights Reading Circle on 30 January 2017, with Lyndon Bray as Walter, Kenn McLeod as Gary, Erroll Kinistino as Joseph, and Kathryn Bracht as Margaret.

The current version of *What You Carry* was read at Artesian on 13th on 28 April 2017, directed by Kathryn Bracht, with Brad Graham as Walter, Donny Ready as Gary, Simon Moccasin as Joseph, and Marianne Woods as Margaret.

## Acknowledgements

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*For the children*

Characters: A father, Walter Turner, 76 years old, a retired teacher  
A mother, Margaret Turner, 73 years old, a homemaker  
A son, Gary Turner, 45 years old, a lawyer  
A visitor, Joseph Bird, 53 years old, unemployed (or perhaps self-employed)

Note: A dash (—) indicates the speech is cut off by the line that follows; a slash (/) indicates the point where the following line of dialogue begins—in other words, overlapping speech.

Most of the play takes place in 2008—around the time of the federal government’s apology for residential schools. The last scene, however, takes place some seven or eight years later.

*A small garden table is on stage with two chairs beside it. Lights up on WALTER. Bandages cover his eyes.*

WALTER: Listen:

The crackle of leaves on the trees, the ones that refuse to give up, to fall to the ground. Giving shape to the breeze. The leaves that have dropped blow around the yard, crunch under my feet. The smell of those fallen leaves, the ones that let go. The dead.

Another year dying.

I'll be gone soon. I'm an old man. "Time's wingèd chariot" and all that.

*WALTER laughs.*

Took that in college. Long time ago.

The things you remember.

"Time's wingèd chariot."

It's not hurrying near, it's right behind me, it's almost caught me.

*WALTER grunts.*

Sidewalk needs to be swept, leaves raked. Somebody else has to do that now. Gary, I suppose. I can't. Not any more.

I'm in the dark now. I live there. So sudden. Just, lights out. One day I can see, the next. . . .

These new words. "Choroidal melanoma." "Metastasis."

"Enucleation." Fancy words that mean you've got cancer in your eyes, so we're cutting them out before it spreads. Jesus Christ.

*WALTER raises his arms in a gesture of futility.*

I don't care if it's self-pity. I've earned some self-pity. All right?

*Lights up on GARY.*

GARY: Such a warm day. Indian summer. Can we still say that? I don't know. Maybe it's just climate change.

I'm over here a couple times a week. More, since Dad. . . . Well, he really wasn't up to doing stuff around the house before, but now. . . .

*A short pause.*

Dad slept in. The painkillers, I guess. Mom went out to buy supplies for her big dinner. Not that big this year. Pauline isn't coming back from Vancouver. No surprise, she never does. Too far for a weekend, she says. Okay, but that's not all there is to it, is there?

Never mind.

And I don't have Jessica this weekend, and no way is Judy coming over to play happy family for Thanksgiving. She never liked my parents anyway. Blames everything on them. "They made you who you are," she says. "It's their fault."

Yeah, probably. My mother always says, the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree.

I tried to change, you know. I tried to apologize, told her I was in therapy, but. . . .

Didn't make any difference. It was already broken between us.

I told Mom not to make a big deal this year. But she loves the idea of a family dinner. Even if the family's a lot smaller than it used to be.

*Pause.*

*GARY moves to WALTER, takes his arm, and helps him sit down at the table.*

Isn't this better?

WALTER: What?

GARY: The sunshine. Won't get many more days like this.

*WALTER grunts.*

WALTER: I'd rather sit in the back.

GARY: Sunnier out front.

WALTER: I don't care.

GARY: It's good for you. Warm your bones.

WALTER: I don't want people looking at me.

GARY: Who's looking at you?

WALTER: I'm hungry.

GARY: I'll get your breakfast. Okay?

*GARY disappears.*

*WALTER sighs and lifts his face towards the sun.*

*Silence.*

*WALTER begins to enjoy the warmth.*

*GARY appears, carrying WALTER's breakfast on a tray.*

GARY: Here we go.

WALTER: Rather have bacon and eggs.

GARY: I'm sure you would.

WALTER: With buttered toast.

GARY: You know what the doctor would say about that.

WALTER: Why should I listen to her?

GARY: You need the fibre, and your / cholesterol

WALTER: / Cholesterol. I know, I know. I don't care. I hate porridge.

GARY: So, the bowl is right in front of you. Spoon at three o'clock, coffee at two o'clock, juice at eleven o'clock. Okay? I put milk and sugar already.

WALTER: You didn't put those goddamned raisins in it, did you?

GARY: No, Dad.

WALTER: I hate raisins.

GARY: I know.

WALTER: Little black / rabbit turds.

GARY: / I left the raisins out.

WALTER: Not too much milk? I don't / like too much milk.

GARY: / You don't like too much milk. I know.

*WALTER takes a spoonful of porridge, blows on it to cool it, and tentatively puts it into his mouth.*

That's not so bad, now, is it?

WALTER: Compared to what?  
*WALTER eats a little more.*

GARY: Not too hot? Not too cold?

WALTER: No, Goldilocks, just right.  
Don't see how it matters now, anyway. All this fuss about what I eat.

GARY: You were lucky. They say they caught it early.

WALTER: Yeah, lucky me.  
*WALTER eats a little more.*  
I knew *she* wouldn't make me eggs. But I thought you—

GARY: I'm just doing what I'm told.

WALTER: If I could see, I'd make my own damned bacon and eggs.  
*WALTER takes another spoonful.*  
When'll she be back?

GARY: Don't know. She had a big list.  
*WALTER grunts.*

WALTER: Jessica coming?

GARY: Not my weekend.

WALTER: It's Thanksgiving!  
*Pause.*  
You really screwed that up, didn't you?

GARY: Dad—

WALTER: I always liked Judy.

GARY: Things happen, Dad.

*WALTER takes a final spoonful of porridge.*

WALTER: I'd like to see my grand-daughter.

In a manner of speaking.

*Pause.*

GARY: She left me a list. Stuff to do before she gets back.

WALTER: I don't know why she has to make such a fuss. It's only the three of us.

*WALTER puts down his spoon and pushes his bowl away.*

GARY: Is that it?

WALTER: Uh-huh.

GARY: Long time 'til dinner.

WALTER: I don't care.

GARY: I'll leave the bowl. Just in case. You'll be okay out here for a little while?

WALTER: What's going to happen?

*Pause.*

GARY: He's been through a lot lately. I try to remember that, when he's difficult. When I think about. . . .

*GARY grunts.*

Never mind.

*GARY disappears.*

*Silence.*

*WALTER reaches for his coffee and spills it.*

WALTER: Jesus Christ. *Calling.* Gary? *Louder.* Gary!

*JOSEPH appears.*

JOSEPH: Hello?

WALTER: Who's there? What d'you want?

JOSEPH: I'm wondering if you need your gutters cleaned out, anything like that. Maybe you need your windows washed? Storms put on? Leaves raked?

WALTER: You're an Indian, aren't you?

JOSEPH: I wouldn't charge very much.

WALTER: I don't think so.

JOSEPH: I hate this, you know. Going around, knocking on doors, begging *môniyaw* like this one for a job. It gets old, fast.

Rather have a regular job. Go to the same place every day. Do the same thing, with the same people. I'd love that. Really would.

*JOSEPH grunts.*

Can't see that happening. No school—not really. That place? Wasn't really a school. And too many years on the bottle. I'm doing better now, trying to, going to sweats and that, trying to fix things before it's too late.

This one, there's no work here, I can see that. But I gotta try.

Never know unless you try, eh?

*To WALTER.* I'm trying to get some gas money together to see my daughter. Her mother, she moved out of the city, back home, after we broke up. Be nice to see my kid this weekend. So I'm out here, looking for work.

WALTER: We don't need anything done.

JOSEPH: Needs his lawn raked. Probably doesn't know it. He can't do it, anyway.

I'll try once more, then I'll move on. Somebody's got to need something done, right? One more job, I'll have enough.

*To WALTER.* My mom, she went blind, too—diabetes.

WALTER: That right? Look, we don't need anything done. My son, Gary? He lives in town, helps out with the yard work and whatnot. He's in the house right now. *Calling.* Gary?

JOSEPH: That porridge?

WALTER: Yeah. Hate the stuff.

JOSEPH: Me, too.

WALTER: That right.

JOSEPH: We got it every day at school. Every goddamn day. I never got so sick of anything. Now, anytime I see it, or smell it? It takes me right back to that goddamn place.

*Pause.*

Oh my God.

Jesus Christ, it's—

Even with the bandages. I can tell.

Goddamned Walter Turner.

*Pause.*

Years I didn't think about him. About that place. Just, like, a blank space. Like half my childhood gone. Just—gone.

But it comes back—when you don't want it to, especially then.

“You've got to let it out,” the elder says to me. “That poison in you. You've got to let it out.”

Tell somebody, write it down, something. The truth, he says. Tell the truth. That's the first step.

*JOSEPH takes a deep breath and lets it out.*

*To WALTER.* You wouldn't remember me.

WALTER: Should I?

JOSEPH: Joseph Bird? Well, I had a number there—seventy nine. Remember?

WALTER: Sorry.

JOSEPH: You taught me? At Robinson's Portage?

“Taught.” I guess that's one word for it.

WALTER: Is that right?

Okay. I see what's coming. I'm not stupid. This guy wants something—an apology, compensation, retribution, revenge, something. I wish I'd never seen that place.

What d'you want?

JOSEPH: I told you—

WALTER: I mean what do you really want.

JOSEPH: What do I want? he says. What do I want?

I want to've never seen that place.

I want to live my life without it hanging over me.

I want to've never met him. Seen him. Heard of him.

I want an apology. For him to say he's sorry for what he did. To *be* sorry. And then do something about it.

But first I want the truth.

*To WALTER.* Tell me the truth. Do you remember me or not?

WALTER: The truth. He wants the truth.

The truth is, I don't remember much about it. I was just a kid then.

A lot's happened since.

The truth is, I didn't do anything wrong.

The truth is, I don't deserve to be hounded over something that may or may not've happened fifty years ago.

The truth is, I've done my best, and if that's not good enough. . . .

The truth is, you have no idea. No right to sit in judgement. Not until you've gone through what I've gone through. All right?

The truth is, I wasn't even the worst one. I could tell you stories.

I'm not admitting to anything. But some of those people. . . .

It was supposed to be my big adventure, going up there. A chance to do something different, see the world before settling down. Not what I expected. Old barn of a place. Cold, draughty. Funny

chemical smell—maybe it was the stuff they used to clean the floors. Never warm enough, no matter how many cords of wood they burned in the furnace. The other teachers, the biggest bunch of misfits I ever saw. And then I realize, I'm up here too, I must be one of 'em. That's when I started thinking I'd made a big mistake.

And those kids! It was like they'd all rather be someplace else. I've never seen a primary class where not one kid has his lights on. Ask a question, the easiest one you could come up with, and nobody answers. Dead silence.

Then they'd get back to the dormitories and all hell'd break loose. Turn your back, they're fooling around, fighting, yelling at each other—not in English, either. Oh, no. The whole point is to get them speaking English and they won't do it, will they?

How many times did I see some kid get his mouth washed out with soap for refusing to speak English. But they had to learn.

JOSEPH: I remember him washing my mouth out with soap because I spoke Cree to my brother in the dormitory. That soap—I'll never forget the taste of it. Tried to fight back, make him stop. But I was just a little kid. He held me down—

WALTER: We were trying to help them, all right? That's all we were trying to do. Civilize them.

They needed civilizing, you ask me.

I remember, one night, I went down to the kitchen for something. I don't know what, glass of water or something. And the kids were in there, in the dark, filling their faces. I thought everything was locked away, but they'd figured out a way to pick the locks somehow.

Scattered like cockroaches when I turned the lights on.

“Hey! You're not supposed to be down here!”

I grab one by the hair, the only thing I could get hold of, spin him round, give him a smack across the face. Little bastard tries to take a swing at me. So I hit him again. Drag him upstairs to see the principal.

Well? What was I supposed to do? Let them rob the place blind?

*Pause.*

They started locking the kitchen doors at night after that.

JOSEPH: We were down in the kitchen one night. There was never enough to eat—we were always hungry, always. Porridge, maybe with a little bread and lard—that was breakfast. Thin soup for lunch. Tasted like dishwater. Dinner? God knows. One time we had this fish? Fresh out of the lake. And they didn't even clean 'em. Just boiled 'em up, the whole works, guts 'n' scales 'n' all. Made you sick to look at it. And if you didn't finish what was on your plate. . . .

Anyway. One of the kids, Timmy Merasty, he was smart, he knew how to get into the kitchen cupboards. They were locked, but he'd stolen a spoon, sharpened up the end a little, used it like a

screwdriver, so he could unscrew the thing the lock goes into, you know, the hasp? And the stuff in there! Raisins, nuts. Apples, oranges. Figs, even. We didn't even know what those were. Never seen 'em. And cookies, the cookies the teachers got with their tea. We'd never seen anything like it. It was like Christmas or something. Everything tasted so good. I'll never forget that feeling.

So we're filling our pockets—filling our faces, too—when the light comes on. We turn around. It's Mr. Turner. He's yelling something. Everybody runs. I hear somebody call my name and turn around. He's got my brother, the one I was talking to when I got caught speaking Cree? He's got him by the hair, he's punching him in the face. A grown man, punching a little kid. He's bleeding, too, Bobby's nose's bleeding. And Bobby, my brother, looks right at me.

...

*Pause.*

I ran. What was I gonna do?

I was just a kid.

Don't think he ever forgave me.

His face. Walter's face. I'll never forget it, all red and swollen, like he's turning into something else.

I see him later, Bobby. Upstairs, in the dormitory. His nose's still bleeding. His back's bleeding, too. At first, I don't know why, what happened.

*Pause.*

WALTER: I hated them, hated that place, hated myself for being there. Couldn't wait to get the hell out when my contract was up. I'd had just about enough. Spring came, I left. Never looked back. Tried not to think about it. Went on with my life.

Why the hell can't he do the same thing?

I don't remember you at all.

JOSEPH: You really don't remember?

WALTER: Can't you let me finish my breakfast in peace?

*GARY appears.*

GARY: Hey, Dad. Who's your friend?

JOSEPH: *Holding his hand out to GARY.* Joseph Bird. Me and Walter here, we were just getting reacquainted.

*GARY shakes JOSEPH's hand.*

GARY: Reacquainted?

JOSEPH: Your dad, he taught me, years ago.

WALTER: I told you, I don't remember you.

GARY: Where was this?

JOSEPH: Up at Robinson's Portage?

GARY: Where's that?

WALTER: Gary, I want to go inside.

GARY: C'mon, Dad. Won't be many more days like this 'til next spring.

JOSEPH: Residential school, north of La Ronge?

GARY: Residential school?

JOSEPH: That's right.

GARY: Really? Dad, I didn't know you taught at a residential school. *To JOSEPH.* He's never said anything about that—not that I can remember.

JOSEPH: I'm sure he could tell lots of stories about it.

WALTER: I told you, it was a long time ago. I don't remember.

GARY: Dad's always running into old students, right, Dad?

WALTER: Goddammit, Gary, I want to go inside!

GARY: Okay, Dad. Just a minute. *To JOSEPH.* I had no idea. What was it like?

JOSEPH: Well. That's a pretty big question.

*Pause.*

I remember the day they took me away. To go to that place. My mom was crying. Thought I was too little to go away like that. And Dad was afraid the Mounties would take him away if they tried to keep me home. So the Indian agent and the Mounties, they loaded me onto that truck with a bunch of other kids and we drove away.

I remember the musty smell of the canvas cover on the back of that truck. That smell—always reminds me of that day, of being a scared little kid.

Didn't see my family again 'til the next summer.

Not something I like to remember.

They went to that place, too, my mom and dad. Must've known what was coming. But they never said anything. Well, Dad never did. Mom—she was different. When she got older.

*Pause.*

But Walter, here, he made quite an impression on me, you might say. Didn't you, Walter?

WALTER: How would I know? I told you, I don't remember!

GARY: *To JOSEPH.* I'd better take him into the house. Too much coffee, right Dad?

JOSEPH: If you really wanted to know about Robinson's Portage, I could tell you a few things. So could Walter, here, I'll bet.

GARY: Maybe some other time.

*GARY moves to take WALTER's arm and lead him back into the house.*

JOSEPH: Funny, isn't it, how you can go fifty years without seeing someone and then, one day, there they are. And you *remember*. You remember *everything*.

GARY: What d'you mean by that?

JOSEPH: Years and years I didn't—blocked it out, I guess. Funny how it comes back.

WALTER: Gary—

JOSEPH: You oughta ask Walter about it.

WALTER: How many times do I have to tell you I don't remember?

JOSEPH: *To GARY.* You know, my mom, it all seemed to come back when she got old. She never talked about it, then all of a sudden she couldn't shut up about it.

*Pause.*

Terrible stories.

GARY: Anyway—

JOSEPH: Don't you want to know?

GARY: Know what?

JOSEPH: What he used to do.

WALTER: I didn't do anything.

GARY: You'd better go.

JOSEPH: Walter, this is your chance. Get it off your chest.

GARY: Hey—

JOSEPH: If you don't tell him, I will—and I remember every detail.

GARY: What are you talking about? *To WALTER.* What's he talking about?

WALTER: How should I know?

JOSEPH: It's like yesterday. Standing here, looking at him.

GARY: Okay. That's enough. You're scaring my father—he's blind, he's old, he can't remember you. If you don't leave, I'm going to call the police.

*GARY takes his phone out of his pocket.*

JOSEPH: Hey, go ahead. They might like to hear what I got to say.

GARY: Is that supposed to be a threat?

JOSEPH: You people. You stole the land, you stole us from our parents. Tried to steal our language, our culture, who we are. Made us feel like we were less than nothing.

GARY: *We* didn't do that.

JOSEPH: Yeah, right. Ask your father.

WALTER: I didn't do anything!

JOSEPH: Nah, just happened.

GARY: Look, you're trespassing and you need to leave.

JOSEPH: I'm not going anywhere.

GARY: Get the fuck out of here!

JOSEPH: Okay, then. I'll show you. Look.

*JOSEPH pulls his shirt off over his head and drops it on the ground.*

*He turns around to show GARY and WALTER his scarred back. The scars clearly continue down onto his buttocks.*

*Silence.*

GARY: What the hell?

JOSEPH: *That's* what he did.

*Pause.*

I told you he made an impression.

GARY: Dad?

JOSEPH: He liked—he liked to use a belt. He'd fly into a rage, and grab a kid, make him take his shirt off, and his pants. Tell him to hand over his belt. Then—

Then he'd use that belt—

The buckle end.

*Pause.*

WALTER: Gary, take me inside.

GARY: Jesus Christ, Dad.

JOSEPH: That's not all he did.

WALTER: He's lying, Gary. You can see that, can't you?.

JOSEPH: Been thinking about you, lately. Wondering what I'd do if I ever saw you again. If I'd give you a taste of your own medicine. Maybe I should. But look at you, just look at you. What's the point?

GARY: I didn't know.

JOSEPH: You do now.

*JOSEPH disappears. GARY watches him leave and then turns to look at WALTER.*

*Silence.*

*MARGARET appears, carrying two bags of groceries.*

MARGARET: I love big family dinners. Everybody gathered round the table. It's the most important thing, don't you think? Family.

Walter's had a hard time the last little while, but whenever he gets down, I tell him, just think of all the lives you've touched. I tell him, you should be proud.

And he gave back to the community, you know. Was a deacon at the church. Volunteered for the Cancer Society. He did so many good things. He's lived a good life. He's a good man.

*To GARY and WALTER.* Hi Gary! Hello, honey.

*MARGARET kisses WALTER, then puts the groceries on the table.*

Oh, dear, what happened here? Gary, could you get a cloth? And then, could you get the groceries—

*Pause. MARGARET notices that something is wrong.*

What's going on?

GARY: Did you know Dad taught at a residential school?

MARGARET: Robinson's Portage? Of course—that was before we got married, wasn't it?

GARY: And has he ever told you—

WALTER: He was lying.

MARGARET: Who?

GARY: Do you know what he did there?

WALTER: It was all lies.

MARGARET: Gary, could you get the groceries?

WALTER: I didn't do anything wrong.

GARY: D'you know what he did there?

MARGARET: Taught kids, I guess. Gary, please. I have to cook a big dinner, you know.

GARY: Mom—

MARGARET: Did he get his pills? You didn't let him have eggs, did you?

WALTER: I had porridge.

MARGARET: Good. *To GARY.* What's wrong with you?

GARY: So you don't know.

MARGARET: Don't know what?

GARY: Robinson's Portage!

MARGARET: What're you going on about?

WALTER: Don't listen to him.

GARY: We had a visitor. Somebody Dad taught up there.

MARGARET: That must've been nice, Walter, meeting an old student. *To GARY.*  
Do I have to get the groceries myself?

GARY: He said Dad hit him with—

WALTER: He was lying.

GARY: We saw the scars.

MARGARET: Who was this person? Was he looking for money? People try to run  
all kinds of scams, Gary. Happens all the—

GARY: You're not listening.

MARGARET: How many times do I have to tell you to get the groceries?

WALTER: Not one word of what he said was true.

MARGARET: I'm disappointed, Gary. I thought you had more sense.

GARY: He used his belt—

MARGARET: Oh, for God's sake. Dragging up the past like this. What good does it  
do? Especially now, after everything your father's been through.

WALTER: I need to go inside.

MARGARET: Yes, you should probably lie down, shouldn't you? You've been through enough without this—

GARY: Goddamn it, Mom—

MARGARET: Don't speak to me like that! I'm not going to take that from *you*!

*Pause.*

Look, your father's tired, I have a dinner to cook, and I don't have time to listen to lies someone's been telling about my husband. So, please, could you go and get the groceries?

GARY: Mom—

MARGARET: Are you going to spoil Thanksgiving? First your sister, and now—

*Pause.*

Look, I know you're upset about Judy and Jessica—

GARY: That has nothing to do with this.

MARGARET: Can't we just have a nice family dinner?

GARY: I have to get out of here.

*GARY disappears.*

MARGARET: What's wrong with him?

WALTER: I don't know.

MARGARET: Must be the divorce.

WALTER: Must be.

MARGARET: Come on, I'll help you inside.

*MARGARET helps WALTER up and guides him away from the table.*

*MARGARET disappears.*

*Pause. Time passes: a transition. It is six weeks later. WALTER now sits inside, at the kitchen table. He now wears dark glasses instead of bandages over his eyes.*

*GARY appears.*

GARY: Okay, Dad, the Christmas lights are up. Looks great—wish you could see them. Cold today, isn't it? Want a cup of tea?

*WALTER doesn't respond.*

Dad? You okay?

WALTER: I don't know.

GARY: What's wrong?

WALTER: What if they didn't get it all?

GARY: Well, they say they did. Your scans look good, right?

WALTER: But what if they didn't?

GARY: Aw, Dad.

*GARY squats down, puts his arm around his father.*

You're going to be okay, Dad. It's going to be okay.

*Pause. WALTER disappears.*

I don't know what to think. I don't. He's old. He's frightened.

He's. . . .

Am I really that much like him?

Listen:

The squeak of boots on the snow. A thing you hear only when it's cold enough. Something you never forget.

The wind. The silence. The hiss of drifting snow.

The long, cold nights.

The feeling of your nostrils freezing as you inhale.

“If winter comes, can spring be far behind?” My father's not the only one who took an English course, you know.

*Pause.*

I don't think spring is coming.

*WALTER appears.*

WALTER: Look, it was a different time. My dad, he used his belt on me. His dad used his belt on him. And I used mine on my kids. Didn't hurt 'em. A little discipline, that's all. That's what's missing today, let me tell you. That's why all these kids are running wild now. Haven't been taught them the difference between right and wrong. Of course they haven't learned to behave themselves. Jesus, I'm glad I retired when I did. Couldn't stand it now.

And kids got the strap in schools back then—don't forget that. That's how we kept order. Not like today, the mess everything's in. We knew the difference between right and wrong and by God we made sure the kids did, too.

Anyway, it's not like I was—well, I wasn't. That went on, too—believe me. Made me sick. That's the other reason I couldn't stand it up there. Having to call those, those *perverts*, my colleagues.

But now I'm the bad one. It's not fair.

*Pause.*

Look, I could tell you stories about *my* father. The way he'd lose his temper. The way his face'd turn red, and he'd tear his belt out of his pants—why, I remember him chasing me down the street, waving his belt with one hand, holding up his pants with the other. . . .

Who cares? You think I blame my father for my problems?

So why is everybody blaming me?

*JOSEPH appears, wearing a different shirt.*

JOSEPH:

Listen:

*Niskipîsim*, my aunties would've said.

In our language: the Goose Moon.

March, in the tongue the *môniyawak* left us with. “You taught me language, and my profit on 't / Is I know how to curse.”

*Angrily.* What, Indians aren't allowed to use the public library?

*JOSEPH laughs.*

I saw some kids, from the university I think, doing that one in the park one summer. *The Tempest*. I liked it—all those beautiful words. And that Caliban—he's something else, ain't he? He's got a right to be pissed off. Whose island was it, anyway?

*A short pause.*

March. What a month. Slush, ice. That damp cold. You think it's gonna go on forever, that winter'll never end.

But underneath, things're changing, under the ice. Things're stirring. Getting ready.

*Poko cêskwa*—just wait. A few more weeks. And then the smell of damp earth, new leaves, the sound of birds coming back, flowers. And it's spring.

*MARGARET appears.*

MARGARET: He's my husband. The man who's shared my bed for fifty years. The father of my children. I made vows. "For better or for worse." That might not mean much to my son and his wife, but it means something to me. And let me tell you, it hasn't always been better. But it hasn't always been worse, either. I've poured my whole life into him, this house, my ungrateful children. My family. Now I'm supposed to say that it's all been a mistake? Because of something somebody said about something that happened God knows when. If it even happened. Who knows? People make up stories. All the time. There's no proof, no evidence, nothing, just his word against my husband's. Whose side do you think I'm going to take?

I remember, and this was years ago, my daughter, Pauline, the one who's run off to Vancouver and says she's too busy to bring my

grandchildren to see me—she wanted to know why I stayed with him. His temper—she didn't like it. Well, who did? But that's who he was. I said, "Don't ask me to choose between my husband and my kids." *That* shut her up, let me tell you.

Did she think her life would've been better if I'd left? Living on what I could've scrounged together supply teaching? Who would've bought her designer sneakers then? Her Levi's jeans? God forbid she wear anything else. Everything she had to have—everything they both had to have. "I need this," "I need that." Come on.

Like leaving Walter would've been a solution. Look at the mess my son's in. These people who can't take the good with the bad. Who think everything's got to be just perfect. Like anything ever is.

I loved him. Despite everything.

*Pause.*

It's all somebody else's fault. That's what this is about. Those people drink and carry on and they want to make it somebody else's fault. That's all. And my son—he falls for it. I thought he had more sense.

So, no, I don't care what this person, whoever he was, had to say. I've got my hands full with a blind husband and everything else. I don't have time for this nonsense.

*Pause.*

Listen:

The sound of ball games through the open windows. Distant music.  
Traffic. Thunder. Wind in the trees. Rain.

Long days. Short nights. Just a little chill, some nights, so you  
don't forget. . . .

And the garden—everything coming on at the same time. So much  
you can't possibly eat it.

Those tomatoes. Does anything taste like an August tomato?

I used to spend days, you know, weeks, canning. Tomatoes. Relish.  
Pickles. Jams, jellies. Sweet, and salty, and salty and sweet together.

So hot in the kitchen. Sweat dripping off my face onto the stove,  
into whatever I was cooking.

I hated it. But I did it for them. Never begrudged them a taste of  
summer when the days were short and the nights long.

I loved them. I did.

But I can see now. . . .

“I could not see to see—” D’you know that poem? Emily  
Dickinson. I had to memorize it, when I was in school. . . .

So long ago.

*Pause.*

No. I’ve done the right thing, I know I have. I know it.

*JOSEPH and WALTER disappear.*

MARGARET: Thanks for shovelling the snow. Maybe the last time this winter. We  
can hope so, can't we?

GARY: Well, it needed to be done, and neither of you can do it.

MARGARET: Do you want some tea?

GARY: How is he?

MARGARET: Sssh. He's asleep, in the living room, on the couch.

GARY: Is he any better?

MARGARET: No.

GARY: I've been thinking about him. About those places.

MARGARET: What places?

GARY: Residential schools?

MARGARET: Do we have to talk about this again?

GARY: I've been reading about them. A lot of books on the subject, on this whole never-ending history of shit.

MARGARET: Watch your language.

GARY: What would you call it? Those schools—they're just a part of it. And it's still going on—just take a look at the newspaper if you don't believe me. It's shameful. We think we're one thing, but when you look closer it turns out we're something else entirely. Something ugly.

MARGARET: I don't know what you're talking about. / I didn't do any of those things. Neither did you.

GARY: / I'm talking about my father beating children in a residential school.

MARGARET: I don't have to listen to this.

GARY: What gave him the right to think he could act that way?

MARGARET: Keep your voice down!

GARY: I mean, it's one thing to use a belt on your own kids. But what he did—

MARGARET: Your father did nothing / wrong!

GARY: / If you'd seen that guy's scars, you wouldn't say that.

MARGARET: I can't listen to this.

*Pause.*

GARY: You know what they call us?

MARGARET: Who?

GARY: The Cree. What they call us.

MARGARET: How would I know that?

GARY: They call us *kiciwamanawak*. It means "our cousins."

MARGARET: So?

GARY: So what kind of family acts the way we've acted?

MARGARET: What are you talking about?

GARY: Those schools!

MARGARET: You're going to wake your father!

*Pause.*

GARY: I was always afraid of him, did you know that? You could never tell when he was going to lose it. Over nothing, most of the time.

MARGARET: Maybe you should leave if that's all you have to say.

GARY: You know one time he threatened to send me to the Children's Aid? Did you know that?

MARGARET: Gary—

GARY: He was mad because my room was messy or something, and he said that if I wasn't happy here I could pack a bag and he'd drop me off at the Children's Aid. I didn't know what that meant. I thought it'd be some kind of grim orphanage where the other kids would beat the shit out of me. Kind of like a residential school, I guess. And I was so afraid he'd do it, even though I knew he wouldn't, if only because everyone would wonder where I'd gone and he'd have to explain and he'd be humiliated. But I begged him not to—I begged him. And for years I wished I'd been brave, that I'd called him on it. But then I realized that it wouldn't have made any difference. Would've just made things worse.

MARGARET: Why—

GARY: I remember floating up into the corner of the room and looking down at the pair of us, at me begging my father not to send me away somewhere. I've never forgotten it, you know. I've never—

MARGARET: Can't you let that go? Can't you think about the happy times? Can't you focus on your father, on what he's going through right now? What is wrong with you?

GARY: Wrong with me? What's wrong with a man who beats children with the buckle end of a belt?

MARGARET: Keep your voice—

GARY: No, I won't keep my voice down! I don't care if he wakes up! I think both of you need to wake up and see what he's done.

MARGARET: You need to leave.

GARY: I'm not—

MARGARET: Get out of this house!

*Pause.*

I mean it. I don't know what your problem is, but if you're going to behave this way, then you should leave.

GARY: That guy, Joseph? He threatened to call the police. I wish he had. People who do that to children. . . . It's assault. If he did it to anyone else, he'd be arrested. So why is it okay to assault a child?

MARGARET: Discipline isn't assault. It's / different!

GARY: / Discipline? Discipline! Are you joking? You think flying into a rage and beating children is discipline?

MARGARET: Okay, you really need to leave, right now, before you wake your father.

GARY: I can do better than that.

*GARY takes out his cellphone. He dials.*

MARGARET: What do you think you're doing?

GARY: Yes, police. . . . I don't know, Major Crimes, I think. I want to report a man for assaulting children. . . .

MARGARET: Hang up that phone right now!

GARY: Oh, no, that's just my mother. . . . No, not me, well yes, he hit me, too, but that's not why I'm calling. . . . No, this happened at a residential school, fifty years ago. . . . No, I wasn't there. . . .  
*WALTER appears. Now, along with the dark glasses, he uses a white cane.*

WALTER: What the hell's going on? Why are you shouting?

MARGARET: Your son—

GARY: You're kidding. I'd have to have been one of the children he assaulted or a witness to the assaults? You can't just take my word for it?

MARGARET: Your son is calling the police. To tell them you beat children at that school.

WALTER: What?

GARY: Well, thanks, I guess.

*GARY ends the call, puts his cellphone back in his pocket.*

For nothing.

WALTER: What kind of person are you? What—what kind of son calls the police on his own father over something somebody said? Over something that never happened?

GARY: I believe him.

MARGARET: You believe him.

GARY: I believe him because Dad acted the same way around here. *To*  
*WALTER*. Didn't you? Maybe you used the other end of the belt,  
but—

WALTER: Get out of this house.

GARY: Didn't you? I mean, the way he described you—

WALTER: Oh, for Christ's sake!

GARY: The way he described you, it was just like I / remember.

WALTER: / You snivelling little piece of shit! Maybe I should've used the  
buckle end on you—maybe you would've learned some fucking  
respect!  
*WALTER moves close to GARY (locating his son by the sound of his*  
*voice).*

GARY: You can shovel your own fucking snow from now on. Or whatever  
else needs doing around here. I'm done—with both of you.

WALTER: You ungrateful son of a bitch.

MARGARET: We did our best for you kids—

GARY: It wasn't very good, was it?  
*WALTER is very close to GARY. He grabs his son by the shirt front.*

WALTER: If I still had my eyes I'd—

GARY: What? You'd what? Take out your belt? Is that it?  
*GARY breaks his father's hold on his shirt and flings WALTER*  
*backwards. He raises his fist to strike his father.*

MARGARET: No!

*MARGARET grabs GARY's arm. They exchange a glance, a silent plea from MARGARET, answered, eventually, by GARY, who lowers his fist and turns away. MARGARET and WALTER disappear. Silence.*

*GARY takes a deep breath and releases it.*

GARY: Years pass. Years and years. Seven or eight, at least. It's another Thanksgiving—funny coincidence, eh? Jessica was staying with me for the weekend. Not a girl any more—she was a young woman. All grown up. She was working on some project with one of her friends, somebody from the university. Drinking mint tea and eating cookies in the kitchen. And this young woman—Cheyanna, her name was—she was ready to go home and called her dad for a lift. The doorbell rang and I answered it.

*JOSEPH appears.*

GARY: Joseph.

JOSEPH: What d'you know. Never thought I'd see you again.

I'm here to pick up Cheyanna.

GARY: Cheyanna's your daughter?

JOSEPH: Yeah.

GARY: Well, *tansi*. And, uh, *tawâw*. I'm glad to see you. I want to say, uh, *nikamihtâtamihkan*. Um, and, *kinanâskomitin*. For opening my eyes.

JOSEPH: You speak Cree?

GARY: *Namôya, apsîs poko.* I've been taking a class, at the university.  
Beautiful language. But complicated. Not making a lot of headway.

JOSEPH: Don't speak much, myself. That school, you know.

*Pause.*

How's Walter?

GARY: I don't know. I don't see them any more.

JOSEPH: What d'you mean?

GARY: Well, uh, I. . . . I called the cops on him. For what he did to you, to the other kids up there.

JOSEPH: You shouldn't have done that.

GARY: He should pay for what he did.

JOSEPH: If I wanted the police involved, I would've called them.

GARY: That's more or less what they said.

JOSEPH: Not that they'd believe me, or do anything about it. But still.

GARY: I'm sorry.

*Pause.*

I hear they're okay. My sister tells me they sold the house and moved into one of those assisted living places. Probably for the best.  
I couldn't do it any more.

JOSEPH: Look after them?

GARY: That too.

JOSEPH: Well.

*Pause.*

Listen, there were lots like him. And even. . . .

*JOSEPH exhales.*

Even if all the teachers had been good people, even if they'd fed us apple pie and chocolate milk for breakfast every day, even if I'd loved every minute I was there, it wouldn't've made a damn bit of difference. They were still trying take away everything we are.

*Pause.*

Look, Walter wasn't even the worst one, okay?

GARY: He used his belt on us, too. Not the buckle end, but—

JOSEPH: Not the buckle end, eh? Well, Indian kids're special, I guess.

*Pause.*

I've got my own business, now. Doing pretty good.

*JOSEPH hands a business card to GARY.*

GARY: *Reading.* Bird Landscaping.

JOSEPH: That compensation money, eh? Decided to do something with it.

*Pause.*

Well, anyway. . . .

GARY: Right. Of course. Sorry. *Calling.* Cheyanna, your father's here!

*JOSEPH disappears. Pause.*

Listen:

The leaves, clattering against the branches in the wind, swirling in cyclones, giving shape and form to the invisible, to the air.

The way the wind shows itself, leaves its mark. One of the ways.

One of the marks.

I wish I could undo the damage he did. The damage I've done, that we've all done. But you can't do much about the past, can you? You need to know about the past, understand it, listen to people when they tell you what happened to them, believe them. But you can't change what happened. All you can do. . . .

*Pause. GARY takes a deep breath, exhales.*

All you can do is try and make the future different. Better. That's it. That's all you can do. Right? Right?

*Silence.*

*Blackout.*

*End of play.*