

## ***The strongest blood***

**Richard Van Camp**

That first August after Joey and Leo had graduated from PWS High School, Leo's father, Isadore, had taken the boys out grouse hunting with a .410 outside of Wood Buffalo National Park—23 kilometers out of Fort Simmer in the Northwest Territories of Canada. Leo knew that his mother wanted him and his cousin Joey to attend Aurora College, and that today was the day his dad was supposed to lobby both young men to attend the college this fall.

"Dad, I'm 17. I don't want to be a social worker or get into office administration," Leo shivered. He was tired and cold. He'd forgotten his long johns. Joey was even colder. With his low rider gangster pants, everyone could see Joey's gonch. Isadore had insisted in leaving the house by seven to get the most grouse and chickens and now they could hear Joey's teeth chatter. Joey agreed. "I don't want to operate heavy equipment and I'm not into nursing or being a teacher. We want to make money."

"We want our own trucks," Leo said.

Isadore slowed the truck and rolled down his window. Both boys leaned to see what he saw. "Wallow pit," Isadore said and pointed with his chin.

Leo pretended to be interested. He'd already walked by a few this morning when hunting for grouse and they were all pretty rank. The wood bison would urinate on a spot and then roll around in it. Part of it, Leo knew, was to get all musky as this was prime mating season for the bison and the other part was to get dusty enough to keep the bugs away.

Joey had wrinkled his nose when he'd first caught the scent and had actually dry heaved. "Whoah! Get your stink on, or what!" he'd yelled.

"Shhhh," Leo had scolded him, trying to act all serious, but then burst out laughing. "We gotta be quiet, *you*."

Joey plugged his nose and waved his hand in front of his face. "Ever stink, hey?"

Leo looked around. He could see tufts of bison hair in the rose bushes. Fresh droppings and hoofed tracks were everywhere. Maybe today was the day Joey got to see the bison up close. Leo's parents brought Joey down from Wha Ti because now that the diamond mines were in full swing in the north, his parents were drinking far more than Joey needed to be around, Dora said.

"There!" Joey said and fired on a grouse.

Leo looked. It was a headshot. Joey went to retrieve his target. "Supper!"

Leo looked back to Isadore who was sitting in the truck and smiled. The fall colours were upon the leaves of the birch, so the forest behind Isadore was yellow and orange. Leo stopped and took in the full beauty of the scene. Isadore flashed his lights and waved. Leo wished he'd remembered to take a camera because this was something he never wanted to forget. Even though he was cold, the sun was rising and the air was sweet as the frost left the grass, leaves and trees.

Leo was surprised with what a great shot Joey was. Isadore wanted the boys to compete to see who could line up more grouse with one shot, but Leo could only do that with ptarmigan. As far as Leo saw, grouse traveled alone while the ptarmigan packed up in the winter.

"Anyhow," Isadore said as the boys got back into the truck, "your mom wants you to get an education. You know that."

"We do," Leo held his hands over the hot air vent, "and we will but, right now, we need to make money, and I want to learn Dogrib."

His dad nodded as he thought about it. "Come on," he said. "Let's cruise."

The truck picked up speed and they made their way towards the Park.

Ever since Fort Simmer hosted a sun dance four years in a row, Dene culture had come back with a force: there were now tea dances, drum dances, hand games, singing groups and storytelling nights at the museum that were packed. It was like the town had been in hiding from its own inheritance, as Aboriginal people and northerners living side by side. Someone had even spray painted, "It is time to learn from the Red Man IDLE NO MORE!" on the water tower in huge black letters that could be seen from the bank and drug store.

Leo watched his dad. It was no secret that Isadore was a champion card player and had won Benny the Bank's house in a poker game one night. He'd never gone to collect, but the story spread like wildfire as Benny was one of the most dangerous men in the north. It was a good thing that he was in jail.

*Man, he sighed. This town is so full of the wrong kind of heroes.*

Leo closed his eyes and wondered what his graduating class was up to. What were Larry, Johnny, Juliet, Kevin, Darcy and Jazz the Jackal up to? Benny's men: Torchy and Sfen. They were only getting more dangerous and Flinch the giant who would not stop growing was seen with them. This was not good.

Leo had had a dream one night of holding a leash that held a two headed black bear. It was powerful. Both heads swung and bit the air in front of them and he realized as he woke up that the leash was sinew made from flesh and human hair. It was slick with human water and slime.

"Oooh," he said as he shivered.

Why did everyone he grew up with know what they wanted to do with their lives while he didn't? The streakers: Grant, Brutus, Clarence. They were finding their way in the world one night run at a time. How did they discover their trails in the night? What drove them?

Leo shook his head. This world and his future was a mystery. He just didn't know what he wanted to do or be.

They were driving slowly over a hill when Isadore drew his breath in fast and stopped his truck.

"What, Dad?" Leo asked.

Isadore nodded and pointed quickly with his lips.

"Whoah," Joey said in a whisper.

Down the hill walked a herd of six bison cows led by a strong bull. Leo watched in awe how the bull trotted, easily handling its bulky body, with a hump that must have been six feet high. The bull's thick head was black but the rest of the body was brown. The herd's breath rose together.

Walking towards them was another younger bull with eight cows. The junior bull was smaller than the older bull. Both stopped when they got close enough.

"Get out of the truck quietly," Isadore pulled out a pair of binoculars from the glove box.

"Don't slam your doors."

Leo and Joey did as they were told. Joey was out first and he put his hands over his brow to block out the rising sun. Leo did the same.

Isadore motioned for the boys to hunch down so the bison would not see or smell them. Leo crouched and Joey knelt. Leo squinted and took a good hard look at the older bull whose beard and chaps were fuller. Thick black horns shone in the sun and the older bull stood perfectly still as he waited for the younger bull to come closer.

The younger bull walked with a raised head towards the older bull and his cows stopped before he did. It was almost as if they knew what was going to happen before anyone else, including the men. Three ravens flew from the west and perched themselves on the tallest spruce across the highway. Leo shook his head at them. If they were here, he thought, this would get serious.

The older bull looked back once to the lead cow in his harem and motioned towards the bush to the left. The lead cow did as she was told and walked off with the five other cows and stood quietly together.

The younger bull did the same. His cows walked off to his right.

"Wolves," Isadore whispered. "Look at their tails."

Leo saw the tails on two of the cows belonging to the older bull. They looked like extension cords without their natural hide. Wolves had chased two of the cows and had yanked so hard on their tails with their teeth that they'd pulled off their fur. No wonder, Leo thought, the cows did not walk with yearlings. The wolves must have taken them all. Leo imagined the older bull goring the wolves with his horns or kicking them with his powerful hooves.

Leo suddenly wished his mom was there with them so she could see this, but she'd not been feeling well and had told them to head out without her.

The last time they'd all gone for a family cruise, they'd passed by a bull with only a snub for a tail. "Look at that!" Leo said as he sat up in the backseat. The snub of the bull's tail had

looked like a little black finger wriggling around. “Oh, how he must suffer with the bugs,” Dora had said.

“Get ready, boys,” Isadore said, and Leo could hear the excitement in his voice. Leo looked at his dad. Isadore was in absolute awe of the scene that was about to unfold. He looked at Joey who was grinning widely. Leo looked at Joey’s braces, and when he saw Joey’s smile and shining eyes he was suddenly filled with so much love for Joey that his blood warmed in his back and shoulders.

The two bulls stood like gods on four legs, opposing each other. They lowered their heads at the same time, their beards brushing the frost. The bulls started pawing the earth. The younger bull let out a jet of piss and the older bull raised his massive head quickly to catch its scent.

“Who’s the toughest, Leo?” Joey asked out loud. “The one with more experience or the one who’s the youngest?”

“Sometimes the biggest isn’t the toughest,” Leo said, eyeing the smaller bull.

“It’s the strongest who’s gonna win this,” Isadore answered and both bulls charged, raising their heads and slammed them together. It took a split second before the sound hit and it was a solid, “*Ca-rack!*”

The sound was so loud one of the ravens jumped up and soared before landing again on a spruce bough directly above the battleground. The other two ravens followed and the spruce boughs swayed as they landed upon them.

The bulls pushed against each other and, at first, no bull gave ground but soon the older bull was pushed backwards. Leo was surprised to see tufts of fur rise and float in the air.

“Ho-la,” Joey said.

“Fur, no less,” Leo said.

All of the cows watched quietly, patiently still. Only their rising breath or a tail flip gave away that they were still alive.

The bulls stopped and backed up. They were going to charge again.

“Twenty bones on the young one,” Joey said and started rubbing his hands together.

“How about whoever loses buys lunch.”

“Shhh,” Leo said.

“Deal,” Isadore said and Leo looked at both men. They were smiling. Because of his father’s twisted fingers, he couldn’t shake hands properly, but it was understood: the bet was solid. Leo shook his head, grinned, and went back to staring.

The bulls started off the same as before, rising like rams before a head butt, but this time the older bull swung his head low and to the right under the younger bull, digging his left horn under the younger bull’s right leg. The younger bull had not anticipated this and had overshot his mark and was now off balance. The older bull lifted the top half of the younger bull’s body off the ground and began digging his horn into the nerve bed of the younger bull, shredding tendons

and ligaments in the pit of the younger bull's leg. The men heard the younger bull cry out in a wail, a man's voice, and Leo winced, imagining the gristle popping and then it was over.

"Hooked 'im," Isadore said.

The older bull dropped the younger bull, but when the younger bull landed on his front hooves, his left hoof would not work. It froze like a horse's wooden leg on a carousel.

"Holy shit!" Joey said.

"Did you see that?" Leo asked stupidly.

Isadore was silent and watched the scene through the binoculars.

The older bull pushed him off the road into the ditch with his horns and the younger bull could only hop on three legs to maintain his balance.

"Paralyzed him," Isadore said.

Leo looked to his dad and suddenly felt sick. He looked to Joey who had his mouth open. Leo suddenly felt very cold. "Just like that?"

Isadore nodded. "Just like that."

The older bull looked to his harem and nodded. All six cows moved together. They walked as one, a herd of muscle and power past the younger bull who hopped in the ditch, alone.

The younger bull tried to hop his way back on the road but couldn't.

The older bull and his cows passed the younger bull's eight cows and, without a motion that Leo could see, the younger bull's cows joined the tail end of the older bull's harem.

"Fourteen cows," Joey yelled. "Fourteen cows! Not bad for a morning's work, eh?"

The junior bull stood still, stood shivering, breathing heavily, its tongue hanging out of its mouth, while the older bull walked away with fourteen cows behind him.

Leo looked to the ravens. One was watching him, Leo thought, with human eyes. The ravens spread their wings and dropped down closer, jumping to the spruce boughs below, getting closer to the bull.

"The old bull played weak, hey?" Isadore said. "I used to do that."

"What?" Leo asked.

"When I used to play cards, I played weak if I had pocket Aces or a full house." He looked to his son. "Sometimes you gotta play weak to get what you want."

"Hunh," Leo said and nodded.

"What'll happen now?" Joey asked.

"Wolves," Isadore said.

Leo nodded. "Want to go home and get your .30-30?"

Leo saw Isadore and Joey both look at the .410 Joey had beside him. "No. We're in the Park. The wolves will get him."

"That's it?" Leo asked as he took one last look at the lone bull with its dead leg. "That's it," his father answered. "Let's go for lunch. Joey's buying."

"Wha!" Joey said. "I'm 17 and buying lunch? Cheap!"

"Deal's a deal," Isadore said and winked at Leo.

Leo looked back to the trees. The raven that had been watching him had vanished. Leo thought of the old medicine man named Snowbird, placing his hand on his forehead. “Pay the water,” the old man told him, “and feed the fire. Look for the signs and, when you are ready, come with me to *Tso Kwi*, Dream Mountain.”

The north, he thought, is a place of survival and miracles. Anything can happen anytime. The outlaws, Torchy and Sfen, were on the run. He used to fear them. They burned down 30 homes months ago and the town was now starting to rebuild. His dad had thought he’d seen one of them—probably Torchy—scurrying across the highway one night coming home, but maybe it was a wolverine.

He watched his dad walk with Joey and he felt his soul blush with love for them both.

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” he thought, “but until I leave, I’m going to enjoy every single second of Home for as long as I can.”

He looked up to the sky. “Mahsi cho, Creator, for this life of mine. I am so grateful to you. Mahsi!