

# Cibou

A Novel

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The logo for Cape Breton University Press is a stylized, geometric emblem. It consists of a central square with a smaller square inside it, rotated 45 degrees. The space between the two squares is filled with a repeating pattern of small, interlocking shapes, creating a textured, woven appearance. The entire logo is rendered in a light gray color.

For Mark, who never stopped asking,  
“When are you going to write about Captain Daniel?”

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*i*nto the land of Kluskap came two brothers. One was saintly, the other worldly. One coveted men's souls; the other their fortunes. One I knew as completely as a woman can know a man. The other? I have not touched even the hem of his garment.

Bright Eyes once said that all good tales begin in the Long Ago, when Kluskap still walked among these mountains. Even today, the land bears the imprint of his hand. The rocks just offshore are all that remain of his canoe, smashed in a rage. Those broken islands are the maidens who dared to laugh.

Father Antoine laughed as I trembled for his safety, for our people whisper that Kluskap will one day awake to help them in their time of need. At night, I look out from my bed, to where he lies asleep under the mountains. I picture him stretching his great thighs, and throwing back the blanket of snow. Then I pray to Antoine's god, to protect our land from the coming wrath. Sometimes it is not until dawn that I feel it is safe to sleep.

My name is Marie-Ange and I have lived here below the sacred mountain since my birth. Until they came, I was named Apukji'j, in the way of our people, for the small mouse that trembles beneath the fallen leaves. Later, Antoine named me for the mother of his god, and the bright angels who attend her. There are times when I wish I had kept the name of the mouse. A little mouse does not have so far to fall.

After so many changes, it is difficult to remember that other life, before they came and changed my world forever. Of the days before I was born, I know only what my mother told me. She was a widow who lived in one of the humblest wikuoms, on the very edge of the village. In her youth, she had lost two sons and no one wanted to take a chance on her, even as a second wife. But sometimes one of the young hunters would bring her his quarry to dress. And that is how she lived, preparing the skin to make into fine clothing and receiving a little meat in return.

My father was French. Each spring, for almost a hundred years the French had arrived on our beaches, where they stretched out the fish to dry. Always I smell the faint odour of fish on the wind when I think of them.

He, my father, came only once to our land. He did not speak my mother's language, and so she could not tell him about the lost sons. She said it was good to have a man again, even one who was covered in hair and who could not speak as a civilized person. He came to her late at night, after the fish were cleaned and left just as the boats were leaving the shore. My mother was happy he came after the sun had set. She felt uneasy when he looked at her with the blue eyes of a young cougar. She wondered if, in his land, the people had completely transformed into humans. In the Long Ago, said Bright Eyes, humans and animals formed a single people, with a single language. Even today, it is whispered, some of us remain more animal than human.

My mother worried when I was born with the eyes of my father. I often felt her own eyes upon me, watching, for signs.

“You’re too greedy,” she would say, as I reached one too many times into the kettle, for another piece of meat. “You know that in the Long Ago, Kluskap changed the people into animals, for rushing to drink the sacred water.”

That was not exactly how it happened, I knew, but I pulled back from the pot just the same.

We remained on the fringe of the village, my mother and I. With my birth, her chances of finding a husband had shrunk even further. Other women had borne a fisherman’s child, but none with eyes like mine. People suddenly remembered that no one had known my mother’s family. She herself had been born on the larger island, that ancient place the fishermen call *Terre Neuve*, meaning new. Perhaps there too, people whispered, the transformation from animal to human had not been entirely complete. To be safe, they warned their children, it was best not to get too close.

Only old Bright Eyes ignored the danger, sometimes bringing us a rabbit or a marten he had snared and staying to talk with my mother, sometimes far into the night. His real name was Kesasek but I had called him Bright Eyes since my childhood, when he would twinkle at me from across the fire. I sat at his feet as he told us about the world of Kluskap and his evil twin, Wolf. It was from these stories I learned the difference between good and evil. I listened, relieved, to hear how Kluskap had long ago banished the cannibal giants to the very edges of the world. All these things I learned from Bright Eyes. I did not, however, learn what young girls talked about as they sat round the fire, braiding each other’s hair. I did not learn to recognize the secret signs that young men gave to the choice of their heart. These things were not revealed to me, the outcast. Yet, it was time. I had welcomed my monthly courses that summer.

On the morning the two brothers arrived, the entire village was asleep. All week, our men had been spearing the salmon that

leaped up the river. The feasting and courting went on far into the night. As the favoured storyteller, Bright Eyes had been in great demand and so even he was yet abed that morning. I had wandered alone among the smoking fires, here and there picking up a piece of fish, flavoured with the spirit of the trees that grew in our land; here was half a cake, sprinkled with plump berries. Hair ornaments and embroidered belts also lay scattered, but these I did not touch. Much later, after they awoke and remembered the night before, their owners would come looking for them.

I did not know they were brothers. Yet, each in his own way, they stood out from the fishermen around them. One was dressed in blues and greens and yellows, as bright as a bird I had once seen perched on the rail of a French ship. Not even the shells in our wampum necklaces were as brightly coloured as this man's clothing, or glittered so brilliantly in the sun. He had black, laughing eyes, this one. It was, perhaps, best not to get too close to those eyes. Dazed, I turned to the second figure.

He was dressed all in black, in a large, heavy robe that reached to his feet. He seemed younger than the other, with blue eyes that looked carefully out at the world. Those eyes caught me kindly and steadily in their grip, quenching the desire to shrink from him. I chose instead to hunker down on the beach, watching as the fishermen pulled the boat up onto the shore. I already knew, as we all did, a few words of French. Although I listened as carefully as I could, I understood but little of the newcomers' speech, only common words like "boat" and "box." Still, I learned that the black-eyed one was named "Charles" – the black-robed one was "Antoine." Both were names I had heard before.

By this time, a crowd of children had gathered on the beach, followed by sleepy-eyed parents. Charles plunged into the crowd, letting the children stroke his clothing and finger the bright metal tools that hung from his belt. He strode up

the beach, surrounded by the flock of children. Together, they formed a single large bird, with a brightly plumed head and sombre brown, chattering feathers.

The solemn brother held back. From time to time, the blue eyes turned to me, the outcast on the edge of the crowd. As he gathered up the boxes and bags from the boat, he beckoned, holding out a light bag for me to carry.

“Take the bag, Mouse,” a voice beside me said. “He will need someone to guide him past the village dogs.”

I turned to see our chief, standing just beyond the reach of the morning tide. It was the first time I had heard my name pass his lips. In my haste to obey, I slipped on the seaweed on the beach. The stranger was at my side at once, his hand on my elbow.

“Kwe,” he said, his eyes smiling into mine.

“L’nui’sin?” I croaked in my surprise.

His look of confusion told me that, no, he did not fully understand the language of our people.

“Kwe,” I said in response to his greeting, stretching my free arm out for the bag.

Later, as I stripped the feathers from the bird Bright Eyes had left us, I wondered why our chief had chosen that moment to speak to me – he who did nothing without intent. I wondered too why Antoine had chosen me out of all the people on the beach. I did not know then, that he had chosen me for the same reason I had once been rejected: my blue eyes.



**E**ach brother carved out his own realm among us. Charles slept on his ship, emerging each day to admiring crowds, all waiting to see what he would do next. Sometimes, he let the smallest children put on his great, black boots, laughing as they