Author of the bestselling novel *The Berry Pickers*

WAITING FOR THE LONG NIGHT MOON

STORIES

"Peters continues to rise as a prominent Indigenous voice in Canadian literature." —MICHELLE GOOD, author of *Five Little Indians*

AMANDA PETERS

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WAITING FOR THE LONG NIGHT MOON

STORIES

HARPER PERENNIAL

Dedication

Wela'lioq to all those who have shared their stories
and planted the seed of imagination.
These are for you.
Msit No'kmaq

Epigraph

. . . to tell a story is to retell it, and that no story has behind it an individual.

—MATTHEW SALESSES, *Craft in the Real World*

Content Warning

Some of these stories deal with issues that may cause grief, sadness, anger and fear. Please take care of yourself as you read. Triggers include racism, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, pregnancy loss, murder, physical abuse and drug abuse. While some of these stories are heavy, there are stories of joy as well. I hope you can find a smile in them.

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Pejipug (Winter Arrives)

The pale ones have returned, their skin the dull pink of the early sun on snow. There are more this time, many more. Their clothes are too heavy for the season, thick and rough. Only their faces and hands see the sun. They've been here before and they have departed before. We have watched them, nervous of the cold, not willing to risk the quiet of winter.

Yesterday, after the fish had been set to dry in the sun and when no one would notice my absence, I ran along the river's edge, ducking in and out of the trees so that I could watch them. They don't know we are here, but we know about them. They have been coming here for two seasons now. They arrive in large, strange canoes, but they always leave, some of them die. They cover their dead with earth and wail, scaring some of our smaller children who hear the voices through the trees.

More women arrive this time, and children, some younger than me. The children run around like animals, shouting at each other. Their harsh language is uncomfortable in my ears. Their playful shrieks are louder than the birds that try to steal our fish. Their mothers shout at them, their mouths in constant frowns, their hands raised to wipe the sweat from their brows. The women drag water from the river, the bottom of their dresses wet with mud. The buckets look heavy, bending their backs. They smile very little,

these pale ones. I wonder if it is the heavy clothes and stiff shoes that make them bad-tempered.

The men sweat in the sun as they move large stones from the shore and cut the trees from the earth, one by one. The earth on their side of the river is bare now, the stumps from the trees jagged and ugly. Dirt fills the air as they walk; their feet pound the ground in their stiff shoes. With the stones and the trees, they build strange dwellings. There is little sense in their work as it will be difficult to move them to the summer grounds when the seasons change. They have brought a funny thing, not made of trees or stone. It looks like a wilting flower. It sat on the ground for days, the morning dew sliding off the top, running down the side and wetting the ground in a beautiful circle of dark earth. But now it sits high on the top of a special dwelling, hanging in an open space above the entrance. No one lives there, but everyone visits, all of them looking very grim, their heads bent, their eyes on their shoes. When the red-faced man in the black robe pulls the rope, it sings! The sound is steady and beautiful like a drum, only sadder. How can they be so sad with such magic in the air, echoing off the trees, the river, the sky itself?

Father is not worried about the pale-faced. He tells us they will leave.

"They have come before, and they will leave again. When they see their breath on the morning air, they will leave," he explained around the fire last night. I shook my head as I watched the sparks from the fire climb to take their rightful place in the sky.

"But they brought children, they made homes, and brought a magic flower that sings like the drum. Maybe they will stay this time."

"They will not. Each year they come, little one. They come and they leave. They will leave their homes and their wilting flower." Father is sure, but I'm not. I think they may stay.

Tiny Birds and Terrorists

The last of the night shift has started to fade into the distance; it's time for food and sleep. In the field between us and those dressed for war, a small fire sputters from neglect. We watch the soldiers as they stand in a straight line, blocking the horizon, their face shields hiding their eyes. They shift nervously and look behind them every few minutes. The morning passes this way, their unease sinking into our songs and breaking the rhythm of our chants. We stand, side by side, our arms wrapped around each other's waists, singing and praying. Then, just before noon, as we spread food out on blankets in preparation for lunch, a crack forms in the black wall as they part.

They arrived two days after the television called us terrorists. So many trucks that the ground vibrated under our feet, and the rumbling woke Sisip'jij. Ten or twenty at a time, crawling out of the back of the military vehicles, large tents erected behind them. Two straight black lines, blocking our way to the road, our access to showers and food. They stand so still, watching us from behind their tinted visors, their hands resting on their batons, ready for a fight that we don't want. They outnumber us three to one. They carry guns and tasers, we carry drums and songs.

“Something’s wrong.”

Mala stands and offers her hand to help me up. Sisip’jij, strapped securely to my back on her cradleboard, sleeps through the tension. Mala helps me to my feet just as the nesting birds lift out of the grass, their bodies moving together, a cloud of birdsong hanging overhead before they bear left, escaping. Opposite us, a few of the men hang their heads. Their chins brush the thick plastic of their chest protectors until the one in charge yells and they snap their heads back into place. Mala lets go of my hand, breaks away from our group and moves to the centre of the field.

“I need to get a closer look,” she whisper-shouts back to us.

I’m very aware that I have Mala’s baby strapped to my back, the ties criss-crossed over my shoulders and across my chest. The others behind me stop eating and stand, walking toward Mala. The air is breathless in the warm spring morning. Sisip’jij jolts awake and begins to cry, frightening those on both sides of the divide, scaring the last of the birds out of the grass. One of the soldiers thrusts his hand up into the air, his black arm silhouetted against the calm prairie sky. When he drops it again, the air is filled with the sound of rushing water. The whoosh of the water cannon drowns out the sound of the crying baby.

“YOU’RE GOING BACK TO SCHOOL,” my mother said over supper.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No. Jesus, give me time.”

My fork fell onto the table and clanged against the plate.

“You’re acting like you have a choice here. I’m still your mother and if you want a place to live and food on your plate, you’re going back to school.” She paused to take a drag off the cigarette that hung from the corner of her mouth. “And I’m well aware of how long it’s been. I loved her too.”

I ignored her last remark.

“You didn’t finish school.”

“Yeah, and look what good it did me. Pumping gas and selling lotto tickets. Nothing spells success like the smell of gas on your hands at the end of the day.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Fine. Become a rez bum. But you’re not doing it here.”

She blew a smoke ring into the space between us. I started smoking when I was twelve in a desperate attempt to be cool, stealing crushed butts out of the ashtray before graduating to stealing them from her purse. I quit three years later, the day I found out I was pregnant.

“That’s gross, you know.” I pushed my chair away from the table. A glass of water sloshed but didn’t spill. I retreated to the couch and hid away under a blanket. She didn’t say anything when I turned on the television and increased the volume to an obnoxious level, drowning out the sound of her exasperated sighs.

I didn’t go back to school and she didn’t kick me out. But three months later, just after a night shift at the same gas station where my mother worked, and on the first warm day in May, my grandfather showed up at the front door of our house. I was tired and ready for bed, but he stood on the doorstep, arms folded across his chest, his lips turned down, his cheeks carved out of the earth. I stopped, looked at him, sighed heavily with defeat and got into the passenger side of his truck. My mother had called in the big guns.

“You’re grieving, and I get that.” He closed the door and started the truck. An old blue Ford, rust creeping in around all the edges, the wooden panels on the back bent with age and weather. “But your mother is grieving and I’m grieving, and you can’t just be an ass about it.” He flung his arm over the seat, twisting to see out the dirty window as we backed out of the driveway and headed down the road toward the highway.

“You allowed to call me an ass?” I rolled down the window.

“When you’re being an ass I am.”

“I’m sixteen. And your granddaughter.”

“From my experience, that’s the perfect age for being an ass. And I know you’re my granddaughter. Why you think I’m here? I also know that you’re grieving.”

We drove on in silence until he turned right instead of left, down an old logging road instead of toward his house or town. I assumed he was taking me for breakfast. He used his thumb to point into the back of the truck where two backpacks sat, stuffed to the top.

“We’re going to do some grieving together, you and me. Let the trees hear you wail, let the river sweep it away, let the tree moss absorb it all.”

I snickered. “You goin’ out for a Hollywood medicine man?”

I do this to people. Say hurtful things.

“See?”

“See what?”

“You’re being an ass. We’re gonna grieve together and work on that for a while.”

The logging road ended, a line of trees marking the line between everything behind and the dark unknown ahead.

“You know where you are, old man?”

“I do, and I also know that I could leave you here and you’d have more of a chance of getting eaten by a bear than being able to take care of yourself. Think about that when you think you’re being smart.” He grabbed one of the backpacks and nodded toward the other. It was heavy but manageable, covered in a plastic garbage bag to keep the wet out. Packs on and shoes already stained by mud, he parted the branches and the sunlight disappeared behind a thick wall of pine needles and brush.

“I know what you’re doing,” he said, turning toward me, only a few feet into the woods.

I stayed quiet, his face a few feet from mine.

“I’m following you through the woods.”

He ignored me and stepped closer. I could see the brown edges of his ancient teeth, the smell of coffee with canned milk on his breath.

"You're letting your grief ruin you from the inside out." He turned and walked farther into the trees. "A few tears and quitting life ain't going to cut it. You need to grieve properly. Get it out of your system before it turns you all black and gunky inside."

"How exactly does a person grieve properly?" I stumbled on a tree root and caught myself with the help of a branch. He bent down to pick up a felled tree, a thin birch. Snapping off the top, he handed it to me. I took it and used it as a walking stick, seeking out rocks and anything else the forest could use to trip me.

"It's different for everyone, but you're not going to find it moping around your mother's house, causing her more grief. Don't forget that you're her baby girl." He stopped and bent to grab the bottom of a tall green plant. He dug around the base with his knife until he could pull the roots out of the ground. "Your little one is gone now, but she had a purpose. I know she did. We all do. No matter if we live two days or two hundred years." He dusted them off and held them to his nose, taking a deep breath.

"What purpose?"

"Well, I don't know. You're her mother. Guess that's for you to find out."

"But I'm not her mother. She's dead."

I could still smell her breath. They let me hold her, her tiny limbs taped to boards that looked like Popsicle sticks, needles and tubes everywhere. They let me put her against my chest and sing to her and I remember the smell of her breath, sweet but sour.

"Your baby girl, bless her tiny heart, wasn't meant for this nonsense world. She just knew better. She wasn't ready. It's your job to make it better so, next time, she's ready." He lifted the plastic bag and shoved the roots into the top of my backpack before he bent down and kissed my forehead. "And you're not going to do that working at that gas station and watching *Judge Judy* all day."

I'm the kind of person who would rather curse and say hurtful things I don't mean than admit I could be wrong. He knew this about me and stood waiting for me to say something we both knew I'd regret. Instead, and much

to our surprise, I pushed past him and walked deeper into the woods, following the sounds of the river.

When we got to the water's edge, we stopped to set up a small fishing weir, tall, sturdy sticks stuck in the mud between the rocks, obstructing the route of unsuspecting trout.

"We'll stay here a bit and wait. You can listen to your thoughts better out here than you can when watching that television all day and all night. These sounds heal a broken heart." He spread his arms, sweeping them through the air. "I think they have some new fancy word for it now, *forest bathing*." He shook his head and laughed.

"If you say so." I took the garbage bag from the top of my pack and placed it on the ground to sit on.

"I do say so. I just did." He leaned against a large rock that sat on the edge of the water. We sat there, together but apart, looking out over the tiny rapids, trying to see between the trees on the other side of the river. The quiet sounds of the woods softly lulled me into my thoughts, my memories. I looked down at my hand and remembered how bruised it had been from where they placed the IV. I can see her tiny body, purple and red, and the bracelet around her wrist telling the world that she was mine, that I had created something so incredible. But when the weir shook and my grandfather shouted out, the memory disappeared.

"Got one!" He pushed himself off the rock and into the water. He grabbed the fish with his hands, pinning it to the ground before hitting it over the head with a stone. He handed me the dead fish as he dismantled the weir, throwing the sticks into the brush.

That night, he roasted the roots and the fish over a fire, and we drank water, cold and crisp, right from the river before boiling the rest to make tea.

The evening was mostly quiet. I stared into the fire while Grandfather carved a stick he'd found for me earlier that day. He admired the stars peeking through the tree branches as he told stories. A tale about my grandmother, who died in a car accident when I was two, about how he'd come to this very wood and stayed for more than a week.

“What are we doing tomorrow?” I asked.

“We’re gonna find your grief so we can look it in the eye.”

I sniffed mockingly, but he ignored me.

I don’t remember falling asleep, my sleeping bag tucked tight around my chin, keeping the warmth in and the chill out. I slept soundly, the deep sleep that comes with fresh air and exhaustion. The next morning, when I finally woke up, he already had the fire going. A pot hung over the flames, the smell of oatmeal on the chilly morning air.

“I got some breakfast here,” he said.

I sat up, shivering, as he handed me a bowl.

“I put some jam on it to sweeten it up for you.”

“Thanks.” I took the spoon and stirred in the lumpy red berries, enjoying the heavy comfort that oatmeal brings.

“How long are we staying in the woods?” As the oatmeal warmed my belly, I grabbed my walking stick to inspect it. The end was whittled into a point with animals crudely carved into the wood: the rough edges of turtle shells, the wide eyes of the owl, and the long slither of a snake.

“As long as it takes.” He smiled as my fingers traced the jagged outline of a bird. “Let’s go.”

I grabbed my pack, slung it over my shoulder and followed. The sun is harder to track when the trees hide it, and I had no way of telling time. But as we walked deeper into the woods, time seemed to matter less. My grandfather stopped to gather a few mushrooms, dig some early spring roots, bitter but food. I dug around in my pack and found beef jerky and Mars bars in the bottom.

“Just in case.” He shrugged.

As we walked along the edges of a shallow ravine, waiting for the perfect place to cross, I saw something out of the corner of my eye—a flash of blue in the dim light of all the browns and greens. I left the path my grandfather had laid out, using my walking stick to keep my balance over the uneven ground, stones hidden by slippery moss. He stopped and turned back to follow me.

On the ground, under the outstretched arms of an oak tree, was a small bird's nest. There were two light-coloured blue eggs, one with its shell broken and empty, the other cracked but intact. I bent down and took the cracked one in my hand, turning it over, inspecting the crack, the lightness of it telling me that nothing lived inside.

"Jipjawej. Robin red breast. Must have been knocked out of the tree." He looked up at the branches over our head.

Something about the lightness of the egg broke me. I could feel it in my chest, sharp and painful. It moved into my belly and I fell to the ground, struggling to get the pack off me. I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. As I gasped, my eyes filled with tiny dots, black and inky. I could hear him saying something, but he sounded so far away. A voice heard through a thousand miles of water. Then the crack in my chest broke, sending the pain up my throat and out of my mouth. I screamed and wailed so that the trees shook and the sky could hear me. The force of my grief pushed me backwards and I lay on the ground. The blue of the sky tried to break through the forest canopy and the leaves rustled, attempting to soften the sounds of my loss. My lungs seemed small and my body heaved as I remembered how light she felt after that last breath, how tiny she was but how the sadness she left was so incredibly heavy. I could feel his hands on my shoulders as he lifted me up, sat behind me and wrapped his arms around me.

"There it is. There it is," he whispered over my sobs. "Let it go."

TWO YEARS AND A BIT LATER, my diploma tied with a little blue ribbon sat on top of the fridge with all the other papers no one knew what to do with. Old bills, paid, flyers and coupons. My grandfather, quietly in his sleep, had slipped away to hug his wife and cradle my baby girl, and my mother was promoted to manager. Nothing held me down, but nothing lifted me up either. Until, one very unremarkable afternoon, I saw it, a post on Facebook from a friend of a friend. I had to be at work in an hour, and I was sitting at

the table, sipping tea, fiddling with my phone, my thumb swiping in automatic boredom. And there it was: SMALL BAND OF INDIGENOUS WATER KEEPERS GATHER TO PROTECT THE RIVER, with a photo of a small group of people standing tall, their arms entwined, crafting a human braid. The warrior flag flew behind them, along with the flags of nations older than this one but none of them taught in school. Signs, the words crudely painted on old plywood or bent, torn and water-weathered bristol board: *Water for our grandchildren* and *You cannot drink money*. Behind them, the glimmering thin line of a river snaked through the flat land. I sat up in my chair, nearly knocking the tea off the edge of the table, and leaned over the screen, using my fingers to enlarge it.

I said out loud to no one, "There's not enough of them." I zoomed in on the belly of a very pregnant woman. "And what the hell is she doing there?"

I put remarkably little thought into my decision to join them. How little I considered anything beyond the need to be there, to hold a sign, to stand with them, a small but present strand in their human braid. I packed my bag, threw in some clothes and a few books, a flashlight from the junk drawer. I grabbed the old tent my mother and I had used once, years ago, when we went on our one and only camping trip together. I dusted it off and threw it in the back of the truck my grandfather had left me. I ran back inside to retrieve a small cardboard box, decorated with holly berries and painted golden bells, a dollar store purchase from two Christmases ago. Inside, a tiny blue eggshell wrapped in paper towel. I stopped by the gas station, told my mother to give my shifts away and stocked up. Mom didn't even argue.

I arrived at the camp the day Mala had her baby, in the middle of the afternoon, the clouds grey and wispy. I slammed the door of the truck to the godawful sound of a woman stretching and tearing, just as the little one burst into the world. That night, my body aching from days of driving, sleeping in the cab of the truck and the chilly prairie evening, I used the moon as a guide and set up. My tent was next to Mala's, making me an