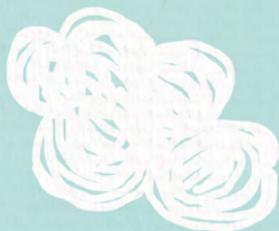
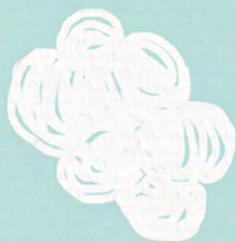


# The Gift of the Little People

By William Dumas Illustrated by Rhian Brynjolson









The Gift of the  
Little People

## About the Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak Series

This series is about the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak (Rocky Cree) of Northern Manitoba. Corresponding to the six seasons of sīkwan (spring), nīpin (summer), takwakin (fall), mikiskow (freeze-up), pipon (winter), and mithoskamin (break-up), the books explore the language, culture, knowledge, territory, and history of the 17th-century Rocky Cree people through story and images. The groundbreaking series centres Indigenous ways of knowing and includes insights from a wide range of disciplines—cross-cultural education, history, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, literature, oral culture and storytelling, experiential and community-based learning, and art.



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*Pīsim Finds Her Miskanaw*

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A Six Seasons of the  
Asiniskaw Īthiniwak Story

# The Gift of the Little People

Story by William Dumas  
Illustrated by Rhian Brynjolson

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© 2022 Rhian Brynjolson (illustration)

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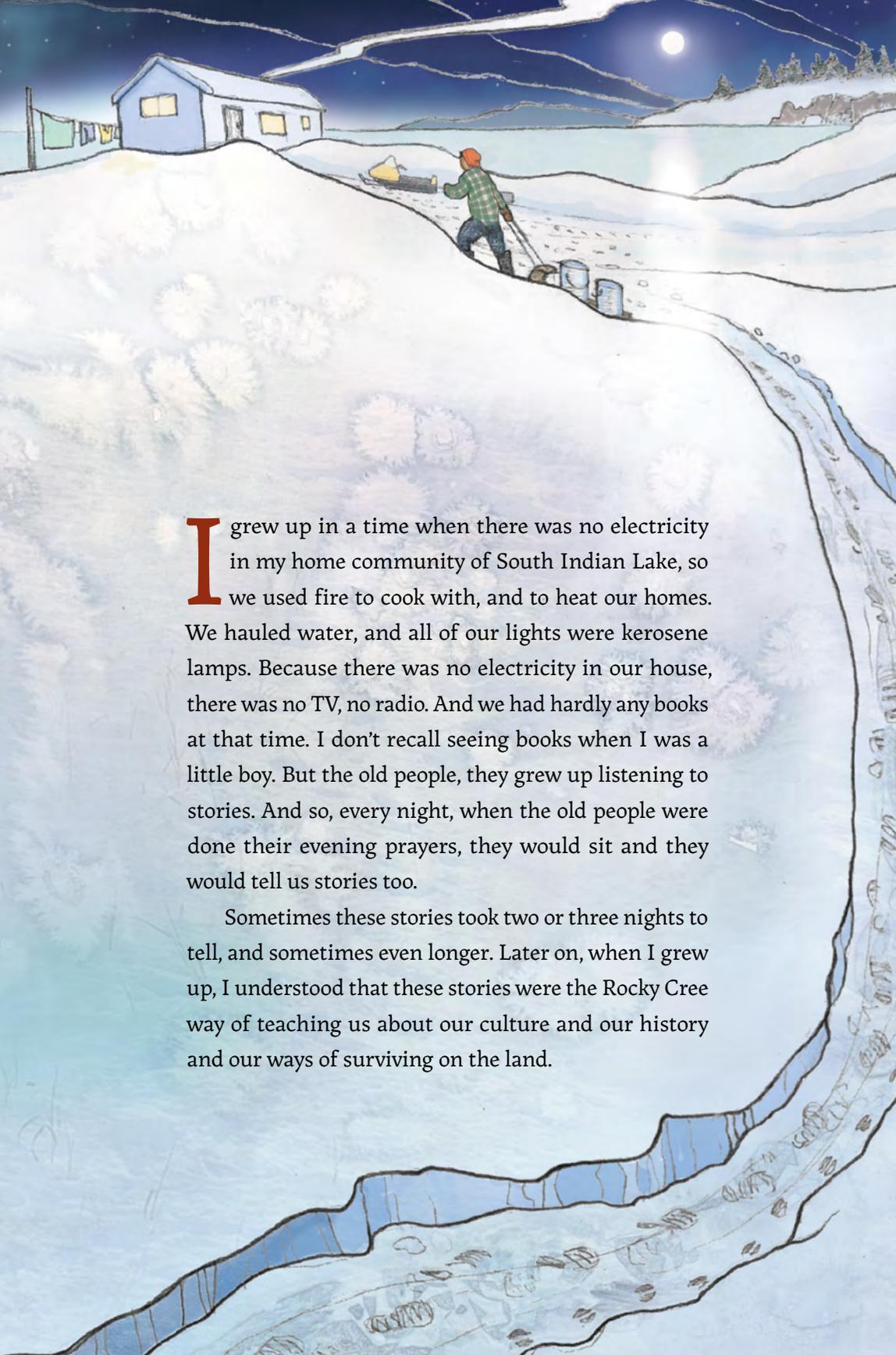
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Treaty 1 Territory and homeland of the Métis Nation

*Dedicated to my father, Jacob Dumas.  
My father was a second-generation trapline holder,  
fisherman, and storyteller from Nelson House.  
His Rocky Cree stories live on today in many forms,  
including this book.*



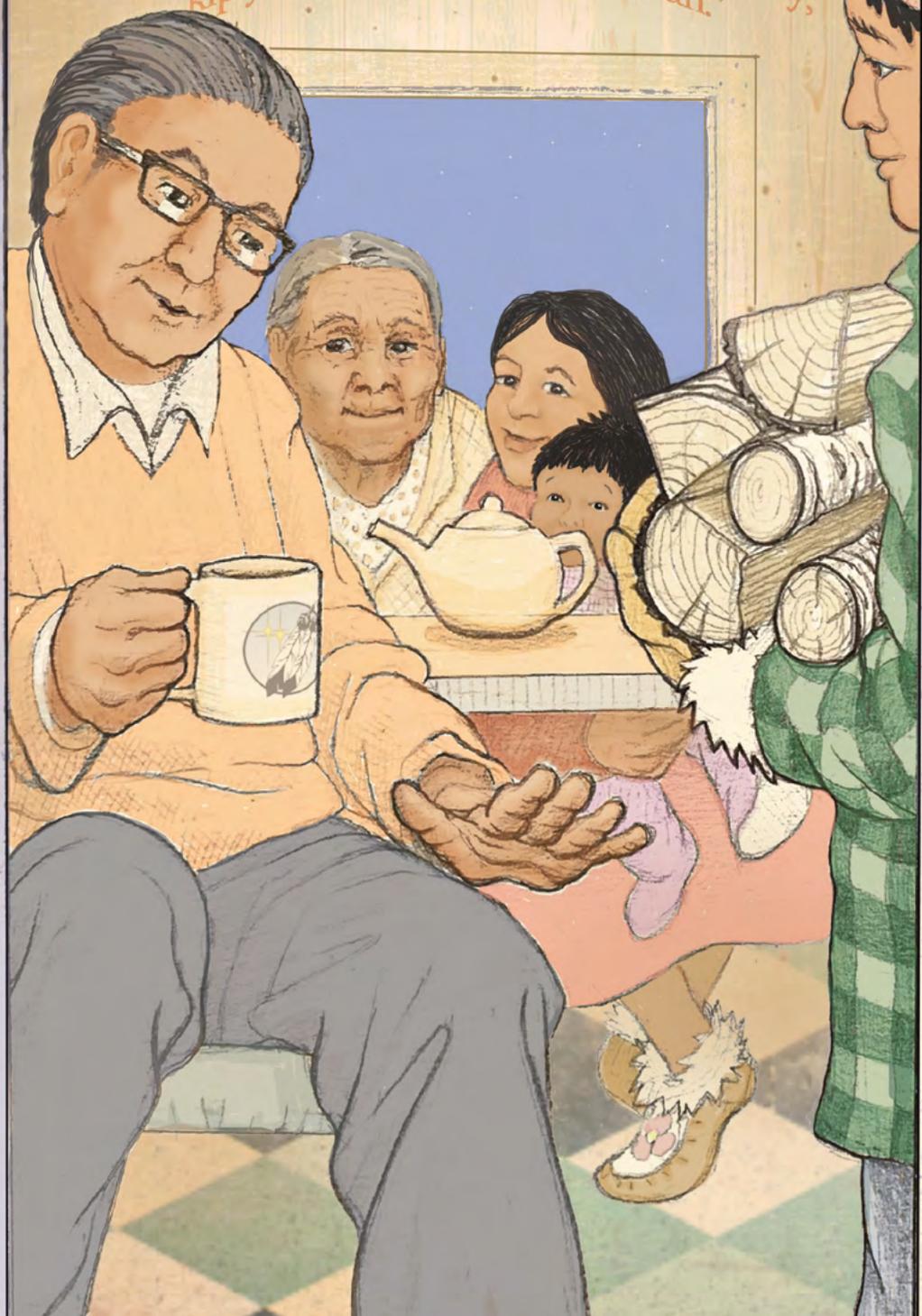




I grew up in a time when there was no electricity in my home community of South Indian Lake, so we used fire to cook with, and to heat our homes. We hauled water, and all of our lights were kerosene lamps. Because there was no electricity in our house, there was no TV, no radio. And we had hardly any books at that time. I don't recall seeing books when I was a little boy. But the old people, they grew up listening to stories. And so, every night, when the old people were done their evening prayers, they would sit and they would tell us stories too.

Sometimes these stories took two or three nights to tell, and sometimes even longer. Later on, when I grew up, I understood that these stories were the Rocky Cree way of teaching us about our culture and our history and our ways of surviving on the land.

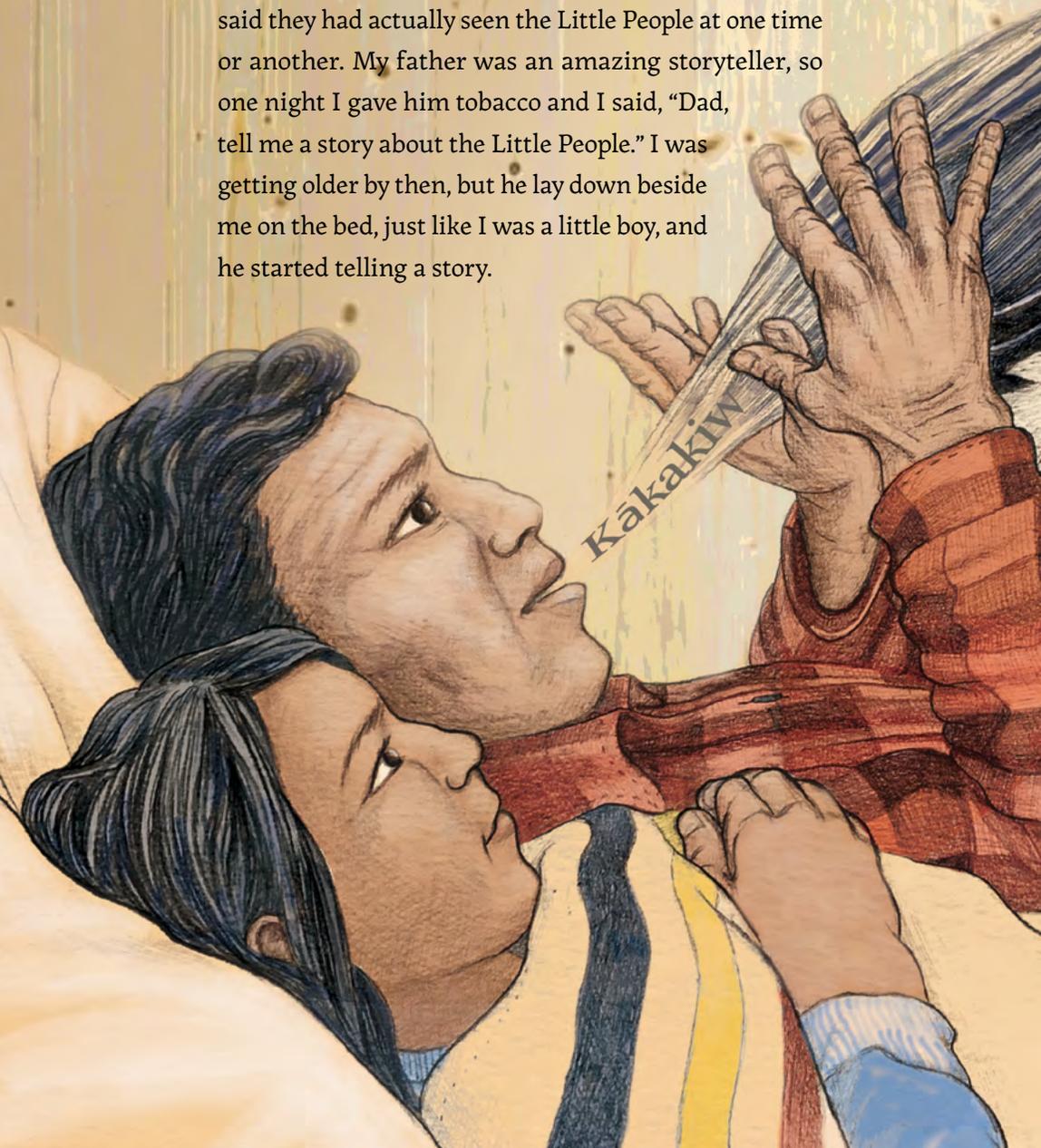
*"Kayās nōsisimak, kayās, kimithwasin askūy,  
kipiyatakan. Kimithwayāniwan."*

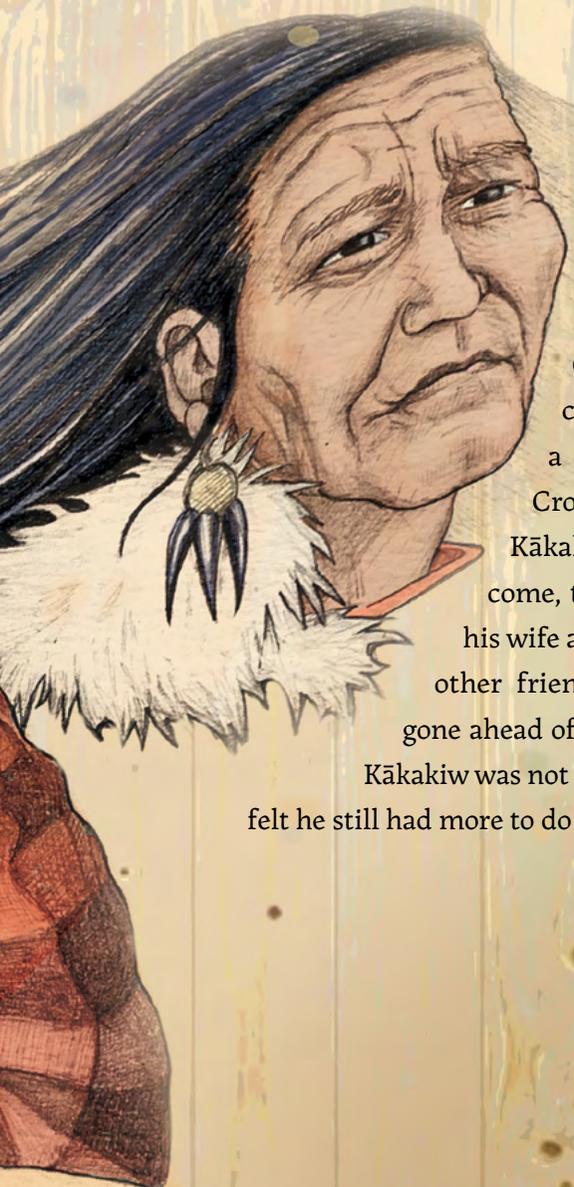


One group of characters that the Elders always told stories about was the Little People. The Little People are no taller than your knee, and I think you could compare them to the leprechauns—except they don't have pointed ears. There are three different kinds of Little People. First there are the ones known as *mimikwisiwak*, which means “static-voiced people.” They are called that because their voices sound like the static you hear when an old radio is stuck between two stations. The second kind of Little People look a bit like trolls: short and stout. The third kind of Little People look exactly like us, mirror images of the people that live in our world—even you and me. They are medicine people, mappers, hunters, trappers, canoe builders...they all have their specific skills, just like us.



I had a special curiosity about the Little People ever since I was a kid, partly because of the stories the Elders told, but also because many of our friends and relatives said they had actually seen the Little People at one time or another. My father was an amazing storyteller, so one night I gave him tobacco and I said, “Dad, tell me a story about the Little People.” I was getting older by then, but he lay down beside me on the bed, just like I was a little boy, and he started telling a story.





He began by telling about our own people, the Rocky Cree, a long time ago. The people were living in a certain area along the misinipī, which is also known today as the Churchill River. The main character of the story was a man named Kākakiw, the Crow, who had lived 69 winters. Kākakiw had seen the seasons come, the seasons go. He had lost his wife a few years before, and some other friends and relatives had also gone ahead of him to the next world. But Kākakiw was not ready to follow them yet. He felt he still had more to do to help his people.



One morning Kākakiw woke up to the sound of the birds saying their morning prayers, beginning the mantra of their daily life. He thought about the excitement people had felt during the past winter. The previous fall there had been reports of a new people that had come into the big bay, *mistiwāsahak*, that we also know as Hudson Bay—a new people who had come in big boats. These people had brought amazing tools that the Rocky Cree had never seen. They had these pots made out of a special material that would cook food faster than any of the pots the Rocky Cree had. And they had beautiful cups that wouldn't break if you dropped them. They had axes that could cut trees faster than their stone axes, knives that were really sharp, and beautiful cloth, different from the moose hides and caribou hides that the Rocky Cree used.

And the people said, "Boy, this is exciting. And all they want in exchange for these special things are the furs that are so plentiful here: beaver and mink, marten, lynx, fox." That's what these new visitors wanted. You give them some furs and they would give you these things.





Come springtime, when the misinipī opened, they decided to send a delegation out to the big bay to trade. The ones that were chosen to go were younger people, probably in their mid-twenties. And the leader of that group, his wife came along because she was a strong paddler and a really good worker out on the land when they travelled. So they gathered all the furs they had and loaded them up into the canoes. And away they went. They left, gone. And Kākakiw just carried on with his daily activities at home. He had an apprentice, a young medicine woman, that he taught how to make medicines, because everyone with valuable knowledge had to have an ongoing apprentice. And he also had a young man who looked after him, his ōskātis. So, their little village worked like a machine, even when the group of paddlers was not there. Everybody had their responsibilities, everybody did their part.





It's a long way from misinipī to the big bay, mistiwāshak. Today it might take someone most of the summer to paddle all the way to the bay and back, loaded down with furs and trade goods. But back then, because the people were so healthy, it took only a few days to make that journey. So it was not long before Kākakiw heard the cries of happiness down by the water when the kids first noticed the canoes coming back home. Everyone rushed down to greet the paddlers, eager to see what kind of things they had traded for, interested to learn about these new people who had come in their big boats. It turned out the stories were true: when they unloaded the canoes, there were shiny pots and cups, very sharp knives, axes, and rolls of beautiful bright-coloured cloth.

The people had a feast that night to celebrate their good luck in making these trades. There was drumming and dancing, and the paddlers were asked again and again to tell everyone about these strange visitors from far away who were so fond of furs. Everyone was happy and they looked forward to making more trades with these visitors in the future.

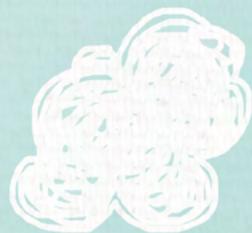


But one evening a couple of days later, just as it was getting dark, the people heard someone crying for help down at the lake. They ran down there and saw that it was the young woman who had gone with the paddlers to the bay. Her husband lay at the bottom of the canoe, and he was sweating.

“What happened?” everyone asked. They were in a bad panic. None of them had ever seen anything like this.

“I don’t know,” she said. “We were going about harvesting, hunting, and all of a sudden he just dropped. He started sweating like he is now. Soon he became delirious, and I couldn’t understand what he was trying to tell me.”

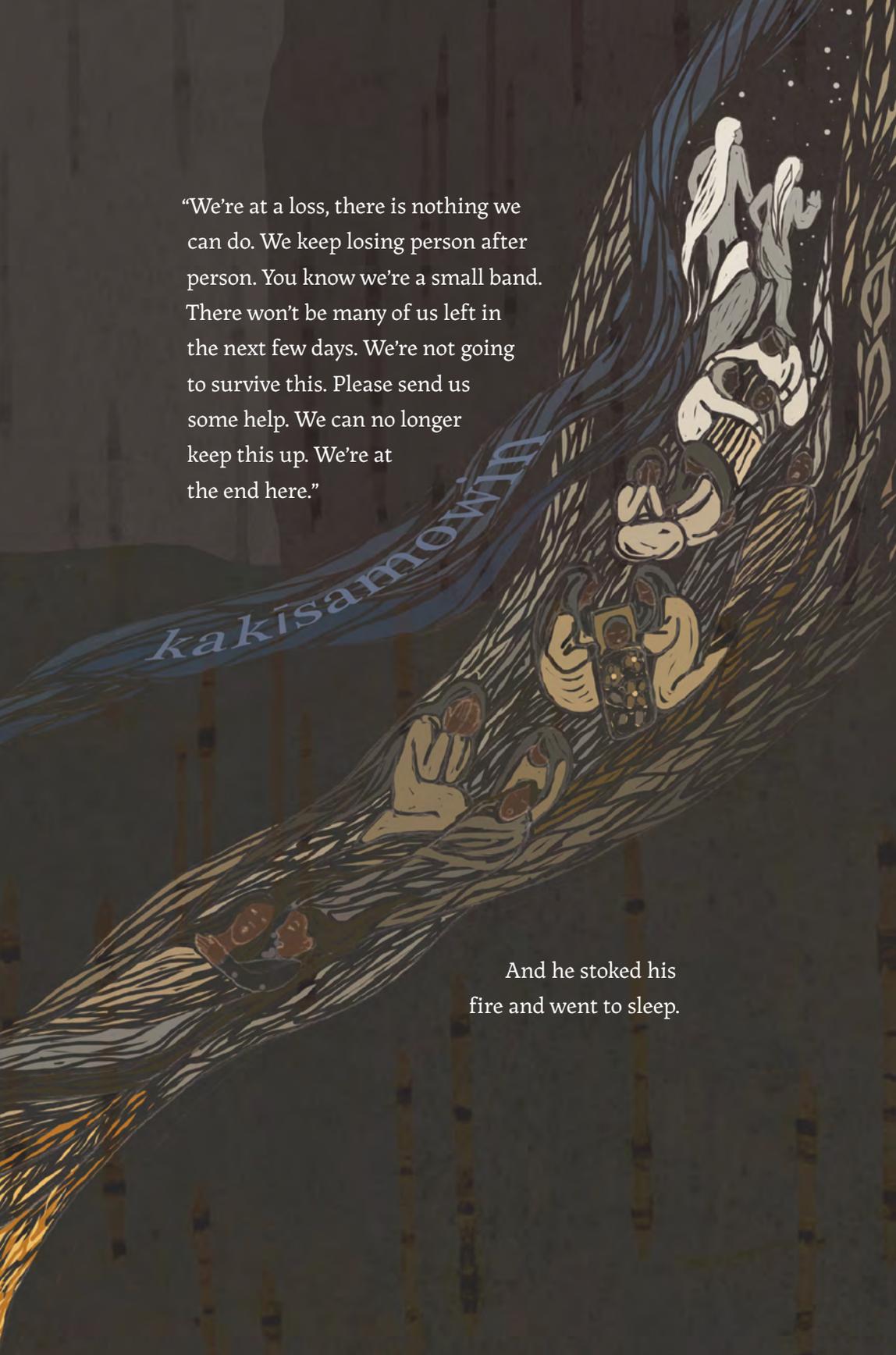
They carried the young man up to the village. That night old Kākakiw worked on him, and the young medicine woman helped too, singing songs, praying, giving him medicine. But by dawn the young man passed into the spirit world. He was gone. Then, only a few hours later, another of the men who had gone to trade fell suddenly ill. He didn’t last. Soon the young woman whose husband had died fell ill too.





That's how it started. Many people were getting sick. Day and night, old Kākakiw and the young medicine woman and the ōskātis, they looked after the people, trying to keep them alive, constantly praying, going from tent to tent, feeding them, giving them medicine, giving them care. But the people, slowly they were going. And eventually, after a few nights, old Kākakiw went into his tent. He couldn't take it anymore. He was tired physically, emotionally, spiritually. He was at a loss because he didn't know what was going on. He didn't know what was happening to the people and he was so tired from lack of sleep. So was the young medicine woman, and he had told her to go home and try to sleep. But no matter how tired he was, old Kākakiw never forgot to pray. He took his pipe out and he prayed and he asked for help:





“We’re at a loss, there is nothing we can do. We keep losing person after person. You know we’re a small band. There won’t be many of us left in the next few days. We’re not going to survive this. Please send us some help. We can no longer keep this up. We’re at the end here.”

And he stoked his fire and went to sleep.



**WILLIAM DUMAS**, a Rocky Cree storyteller, was born in South Indian Lake, Manitoba. For 25 years, he has been an educator and administrator; his passion for the Cree language and culture are well aligned with his current position as Cree Language and Culture Coordinator for the Nisichawayasihk (Nelson House) Education Authority. As the author of *The Six Seasons of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak* series, William knows first-hand the power storytelling has to teach Indigenous youth where they come from and where they are going.



**RHIAN BRYNJOLSON** (she/her/hers) is a visual artist, author, book illustrator, and art educator. Rhian was named the Canadian Art Teacher of the Year in 2014. She is the author of *Teaching Art: A Complete Guide for the Classroom* and has illustrated 15 books

for children. Rhian has worked with the River on the Run artist collective, making and performing art to raise awareness of environmental concerns affecting the Lake Winnipeg watershed. Rhian lives and works on the edge of Treaty 3 territory, in the boreal forest of eastern Manitoba. Her work is currently exhibited as part of the Virtual Water Gallery at [www.virtualwatergallery.ca](http://www.virtualwatergallery.ca) and at [www.rhianbrynjolson.com](http://www.rhianbrynjolson.com).



I don't recall seeing books when I was a little boy. But the old people, they grew up listening to stories. And so, every night, when the old people were done their evening prayers, they would sit and they would tell us stories too.

**A**t the time of the spring thaw, the Rocky Cree fill their canoes with furs, eager to trade with the new visitors in mistiwāsahak (Hudson Bay). But not all of the new visitors are welcome.

When the canoes return home to the shores of the misinipī river, the Rocky Cree begin to collapse one by one, drenched in sweat and slowly slipping into delirium. Kākakiw struggles to help the sick as more and more people pass into the spirit world. Exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually, he seeks guidance through prayer.

Hope finally comes with a visitor in the night: one of the Little People, small beings who are just like us. If Kākakiw can journey to their home, he will be given the medicine his people need. All he has to do is paddle through a cliff of solid bedrock to get there.

To save his people from certain death, Kākakiw must overcome doubt to follow the traditional teachings of the Asiniskaw Īthiniwak and trust in the gift of the Little People.

In this illustrated short story for all ages, celebrated Rocky Cree storyteller William Dumas shares a teaching about hope in the face of adversity.

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