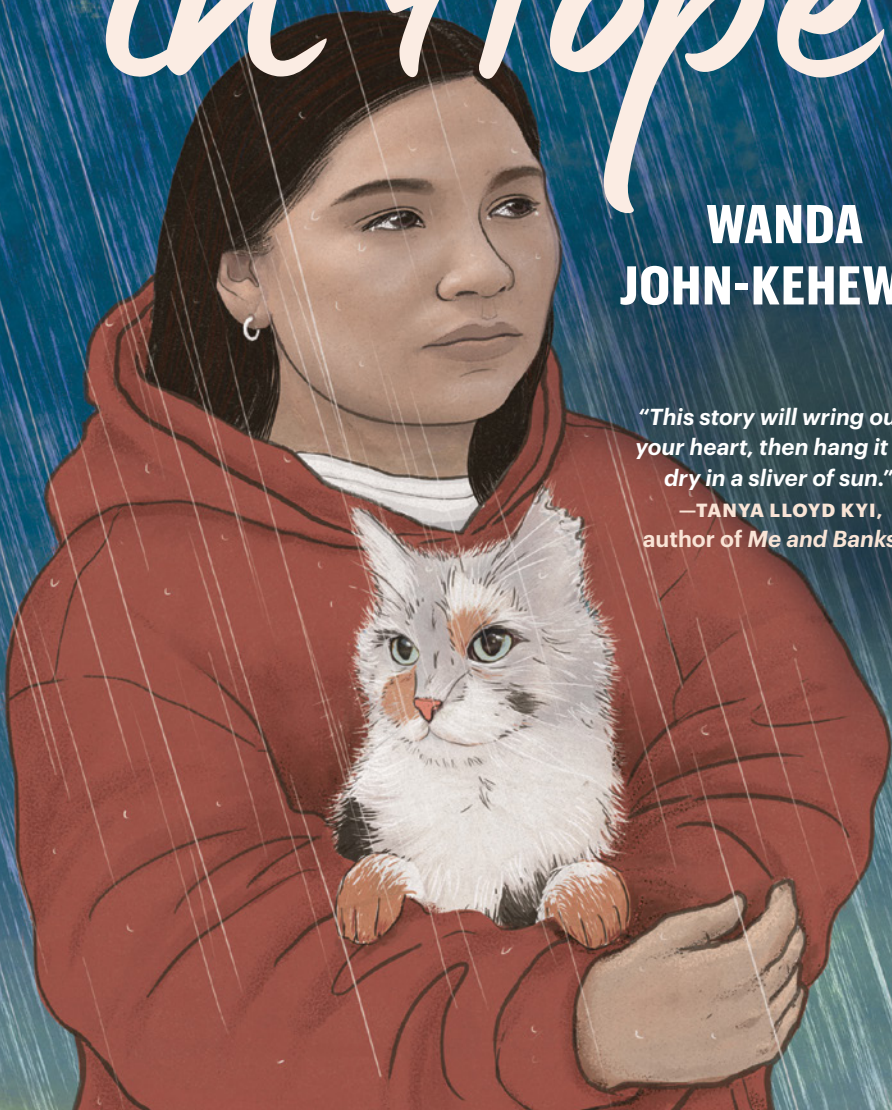


Hopeless in Hope

**WANDA
JOHN-KEHEWIN**

*"This story will wring out
your heart, then hang it to
dry in a sliver of sun."*

—TANYA LLOYD KYI,
author of *Me and Banksy*



PRAISE FOR

Hopeless in Hope

Wanda John-Kehewin handles complicated characters and tough situations with a clear-eyed sensitivity and grace. This story will wring out your heart, then hang it to dry in a sliver of sun.

—**TANYA LLOYD KYI**, author of *Me and Banksy*

If being able to hold two contrasting thoughts in your mind makes you a genius, Nevaeh is a genius. She sees who people really are—and who they want to be—and learns to open her heart to them no matter what. The pages of *Hopeless in Hope* end up being filled with the best kind of hope—hope that grows from a heart feeling full and right even when life pitches us around.

—**ALISON ACHESON**, author of *Dance Me to the End*

It's wonderful to read an author who so artfully channels the voice of youth. As Eva navigates serious challenges like living in a group home and being separated from her family, she observes the world around her, learning lessons about love, the ties of family and friendship, the unfairness of poverty, and the power of finding your voice. Oh, and also soup—the tremendous healing power of a bowl of homemade soup.

—**JENNIFER MOSS**, writer, podcaster, and creative writing instructor at the University of British Columbia

Hopeless in Hope

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WANDA JOHN-KEHEWIN


HIGHWATER
PRESS

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*To my children, Tan, Taylor, Kuna,
Kiyano, and Miya; my nieces and nephews, Aysha,
Chase, Salem, and Kineta; my brothers, Hank and Jay;
my sister, Bird; my late mother, Dorothy;
my late father, Herman; my grandchild, Kenley,
and future grandchildren.*

*May you all know the strength and resilience
of all the ancestors who lived before us.*

A Quarter Can Ruin Your Life

COME IN OUT of the rain, my feet soaked and freezing in my leaky shoes. But I can forget almost everything bad in my life when I see my four-year-old brother, Marcus, and my nohkum. I look at Marcus's smiling face and I pick him up and twirl him around like he's as light as a pillow (and he almost is, but not quite).

Nohkum is standing at the stove, stirring soup in her gigantic pot. I call it her cauldron, but Nohkum's not a witch. She is magical, though. She can make a huge pot of soup that feeds all of us even when the fridge is empty.

Marcus giggles and shrieks as I spin him around. It's as if hearing him laugh makes all the bad feelings go away. It makes the world right again. We've been through so much together and we understand each other perfectly. Marcus is practically my life. He looks at me with his soft brown eyes and a hopeful grin. "Tickle game?" he asks.

I run into the living room and plunk him on the couch. I raise my hand in the air, bringing it down slowly, closer and closer to him. I know the anticipation is what makes him laugh the most. But this time, he stops laughing and starts coughing. He looks scared. I quickly pull him into a sitting position.

"What's wrong, Marcus?" I ask, louder than I expected to, my voice more like a shout.

He looks up at me and says in a whisper, "I swallowed my money."

"Swallowed your money?" I yell, then call out for Nohkum.

Nohkum comes running into the room, wiping her hands on her apron.

I tell her Marcus swallowed some money.

"Swallowed money?" she repeats and looks at Marcus, then back to me. "How much?" I shake my head and shrug my shoulders. Who even asks that in a situation like this? Nohkum does, that's who. She kneels down beside the couch and in a calm voice asks, "Marcus, did you swallow the quarter?" Marcus nods and big, fat tears roll down his face.

I pace back and forth, trying to push away the tightness in my chest, which is there like it always is. I have anxiety, or at least that's what Nohkum says, and from what I've read on the internet, she's right. My heart starts to beat too fast and my breathing comes in bursts.

Nohkum hurries back into the kitchen. I hear her dial the phone and tell the person on the other end that we need an ambulance. I don't know how she can be so calm. I'm freak-ing out because it's my fault Marcus swallowed the quarter. I'm angry at myself.

Marcus sits on the cast-off green couch Nohkum managed to get for thirty dollars. Before then, we had nothing to sit on but a few ready-to-go-to-the-dump armchairs.

"Marcus, why did you put money in your mouth?" I ask in an angry voice.

"I wanted to keep it safe. I wanted to buy us bubble gum," he whispers, and I feel my heart break. Here I am yelling at him when he was just trying to keep his money safe. What kind of person does that? Me, that's who. I am an ass. And not the donkey kind with a cute bow on its ear and an adorable sad face.

When Nohkum comes back in the living room, she asks Marcus if he can breathe and he whispers, "Sort of." She tells him not to talk anymore. She pulls me in for a hug and says everything is going to be all right. When she says it I believe her, because since she came to live with us, I've felt safe. Before that I was always worried something bad was going to happen to me and Marcus. But mostly Marcus, because he is too small to take care of himself.

I hear sirens wailing down our street before the ambulance arrives and Nohkum opens the door. Two paramedics come into the house with a stretcher. The cold creeps in as they stand there asking Nohkum questions. I see them scan the room and I feel ashamed. Through their eyes, I know it looks like poverty—and even smells like it, as the mildew seeps into the air from behind the walls.

We live in a hopeless old house on an almost-deserted dead-end street in a middle-of-nowhere town named Hope. This is the oldest part of Hope; eventually it will all be torn down and rebuilt into perfect homes for perfect people. Until then, we live here: imperfect people on an imperfect street that everyone forgets about. That's okay, because we pretty much want to be forgotten about anyway. Poverty isn't something to celebrate.

One of the paramedics calls Marcus "little buddy" and asks him if he can breathe okay. "I think so," he answers quietly. She tells him they are going to go for a ride to get some help taking the quarter out. Marcus whispers, "Will I get my money back?" The paramedics look like they're trying not to smile. Nohkum, who usually laughs at everything, doesn't find this funny. The paramedics gently place Marcus on the stretcher and buckle down his legs and chest. He reaches for my hand. "Eva," he whispers, his throat raspy.

"I'm here, Marcus, I'm here," I say, as I follow the stretcher down the rickety front steps. Out the corner of my eye, I see our cat running next door to avoid the commotion. I walk alongside the stretcher and stop at the back of the ambulance. I let go of Marcus's hand and he starts to cry.

Nohkum comes running out of the house carrying her purse, her usually neatly braided hair in a frizzy mess like one of those mad scientist wigs from the Halloween store. Normally I would laugh at her hair and offer to do it for her, but there's no time to worry about that now. She has taken off her apron and is trying to tame the wisps of salt-and-pepper hair sticking out in every direction. The paramedics tell Nohkum that Marcus needs to stop crying because the

coin could shift and block his windpipe. One of the paramedics helps Nohkum climb into the ambulance and she takes Marcus's hand. He doesn't stop crying.

The dead grass and leaves are wet and cold under my feet. As the rain spits at the world, it's like all the warmth in my body gets sucked into the ground. Nohkum motions me over and asks me to tell Marcus to stop crying, because she knows he'll listen to me. He always listens to me. He says quietly, "Now I can't buy us bubble gum, Eva." The paramedic makes room for me and tells me and Nohkum to keep Marcus calm, then puts an oxygen mask over his face.

What would we do without Nohkum? I think to myself as I hold Marcus's hand and brush the hair off his sweaty forehead. The person who gave birth to us, Shirley, is nowhere to be found. That's the only thing we can count on from her—to not be there when we need her. She hates that I call her by her first name, but "Mom" doesn't seem right. I think that name has to be earned and she hasn't earned it—not by a long shot. Not sure if she ever will, but so far, she hasn't passed the test. I gave up on her long ago, back when she would let Marcus cry himself to sleep because she was drunk. Yes, I said it. Shirley is an alcoholic, and as the sirens howl and we speed off to the hospital, there's no sign of her anywhere.

Ugly Chairs, Bubble Gum, and Guilt

WHEN WE GET to the hospital, the paramedics whisk Marcus away and tell us to go to the waiting room. Nohkum and I sit side by side on the ugliest chairs I've ever seen. I don't even know why I notice. Now that the adrenaline is wearing off, I can feel sadness building inside me. I start to cry and Nohkum puts her arm around my shoulder, pulling me in and holding me tight. I trace the ugly pattern on the chairs with my finger, following it over and over.

Then I notice Nohkum's T-shirt and start to laugh. I can't help it. It says "SEXY" across the front in huge pink letters. Nohkum's always wearing T-shirts with slogans on them, usually something funny. Nohkum is sixty-five. I know she doesn't care if people think she's sexy.

Suddenly I remember where we are and my laugh turns into a sob.

“Eva, Marcus is gonna be okay. I promise.” Nohkum looks directly at me, and I see the reflection of the fluorescent lights in her warm brown eyes. How can she promise that? I’m sure not everyone who goes into the hospital walks out alive. I know for a fact that way down in the basement there’s a morgue, just like in the movies. But I trust Nohkum. I sigh and sit up straight. I’m crying. I’m laughing. I’m crying again.

“You know why I know everything is gonna be all right? Because the Creator has always taken care of me, and now the Creator will take care of Marcus.” Nohkum places her soft, wrinkly hand under my chin and turns me toward her. Her face is like old leather. “You have to trust, my girl.” I look into her eyes and nod.

Nurses and doctors and visitors walk back and forth down the long hallway, and I notice the wear and tear on the floor where thousands of people have walked before. I wonder if anyone else has noticed the tiles wearing away. Or is it just me being weird, wasting my time thinking about things that don’t matter? It’s helping me to avoid thinking that the worst might happen to Marcus.

“Do you believe me? Do you believe it will be okay?” Nohkum asks.

“I have to believe you,” I say, “because how could I doubt a sixty-five-year-old who goes out in public wearing a shirt that says ‘Sexy’ on it?” I know it doesn’t make sense, but it makes Nohkum laugh. It cuts through the tension. Nohkum pulls me close, and I feel her softness and warmth. I lean in and rest my head on her shoulder, her poky hair tickling

my face. I try to tame it down, but it doesn't work. I pull the elastic out of my own hair and wrestle Nohkum's into a ponytail for her. She smiles at me. I want to smile back, to let her know I can be as brave as her, but I can't. I look back down at the floor.

I have trouble speaking around the lump in my throat, but I manage to say it anyway: "Nohkum, I don't know what I'd do without you." Wordlessly she pulls me close again, and I try to hold back sobs that want to escape, but somehow stay in, bubbling like the soup in her huge pot. "Nohkum? Promise you'll never leave me—I mean, us?"

"I can't promise you that, my girl, but I can promise that for as long as I'm here on this earth, I will always try my best. How about that?" I nod my head all bobbly-like, like I'm four years old, and she kisses my forehead and holds me tighter.

"He'll be okay. He has to be," she says, like she's giving an order to the universe. But she still looks a little worried.

The doctor comes into the waiting room just like in the movies and asks for the family of Marcus Brown, though he's already walking toward us, the only Natives there. Nohkum gets up and I see him look down and notice her shirt. It doesn't seem to faze him. Maybe his grandma has the same shirt. He tells us he needs a parent or caregiver to sign the paperwork because the only way to get the quarter out of Marcus's throat is surgery. Nohkum and I gasp at the same time, and I think we startle the doctor. He quickly tells us the surgery is non-invasive, which means there's no cutting, and it won't take long.

Nohkum still looks worried as she fills out the paperwork and signs it. Off goes the doctor. His scrubs must be new

because I can hear a swish every time he takes a step. *Swish, swish*, like the waves at a beach I've always wanted to go to. Not like a beach at a lake, but the open ocean, where people actually surf. *Swish, swish, swish*.

WHEN WE SEE MARCUS after his surgery, he's sitting up in bed eating ice cream. He's groggy, but that doesn't stop him from gobbling up the hospital ice cream like it's straight from that expensive place with forty flavours. He offers me a spoonful. I tell him it's all for him. He tries again to pass me the spoon. I shake my head but Nohkum gives me a look, so I let Marcus put the ice cream in my mouth. Nohkum says you should always take whatever a child offers you because it comes from their heart.

Nohkum lowers one of the bed rails and sits next to Marcus. The window is covered with droplets of rain and the night has crept in. It looks lonely outside.

"My boy, never put money or anything but food in your mouth ever again, okay?" Nohkum says as she pulls her coin purse out of her pocket and hands it to Marcus. It looks really fancy and has tiny pink beads all over it in a flower pattern. I wonder who had all the time in the world to bead the entire surface of Nohkum's coin purse. Marcus opens it and pulls out a little plastic bag with a blackened quarter inside.

"That's the quarter they took from your throat," Nohkum says. Marcus tries to hand it to me.

"Ewww," I say, and Marcus laughs.

"We can still buy bubble gum, Eva!"

I look at my little brother. I love him for always trying to take care of me. It's a habit for us to protect each other. It started when Nohkum wasn't in the picture and Shirley wasn't really taking care of us. Just like now, when Shirley is who knows where.

When she comes home a few days later, we don't even bother to mention what happened. By then it's old news.

Hopeless in Hope

TRUDGING HOME FROM school in the rain with a hole in my shoe isn't my idea of fun. Nohkum tried to patch up the hole with duct tape and even tried to colour the duct tape black. But I took it off. I am not going to be caught dead with duct tape on the bottom of my shoe, even if it is coloured black. The glossy finish would surely alert the hostile crows in grade 9 who are attracted to shiny, unusual things. I know we're the poorest of the poor, but I don't want to announce what's already obvious. If I do get another pair of shoes, I know they'll already have been used by someone else anyway.

Nohkum tells me if she wins the lottery or at bingo, she'll take me shopping at a big mall in Vancouver and we'll buy everything we want, none of this secondhand shopping that we're used to. Nohkum also likes to say everything is new

from the secondhand store—new to us. That’s true, I guess, but for once I’d like to have shoes that no one’s worn before.

When I get close to our house, instead of going inside, I crawl under the steps of the abandoned house next door to wait for the sounds of peace and quiet or the opposite: things being thrown or Shirley yelling at Nohkum. If it’s quiet, it usually means Shirley has either gone out or passed out. I hope today will be a quiet day. The sky looks like it’s falling, the way the clouds are layered, moving fast, a hint of orange-blossom sun peeking in from the west. I can see my breath. I rub my freezing hands together, watch our house, and wait.

Our old house is drafty in the winter and even draftier when Shirley doesn’t pay the heating bill. That’s when it’s “colder than my ex-boyfriend’s heart,” according to Nohkum. It’s funny to think about Nohkum dating. She definitely hasn’t done that since she came to live with us.

Shirley says our house should have been torn down a long time ago. *But Shirley, I think, then where would we live? We, the imperfects? Where else would we have overgrown bushes and old appliances to hide behind when you’re drunk and yelling at everyone and everything, even the cat?* The sounds coming out of our house when Shirley is drunk aren’t really muffled by the bushes. Hiding is more of a comfort thing: if no one can see me, I don’t exist. And if they can’t see Shirley, she doesn’t exist. If we don’t exist, no one can point and laugh or feel sorry for us.

My real name is Nevaeh, which is “heaven” spelled backwards. I hate it. When people see it their tongues get twisted, a look of confusion settles on their faces, and they say it wrong, like it’s a word from an alien language. It is

pronounced “Nuh-vay-ya.” I came home from the hospital without a name and was named a week after I was born. Who doesn’t name their child at the hospital? Shirley doesn’t. She says she was getting to know me and thinking of the perfect name. So, in the hospital I was Baby Girl Brown. I still have the tiny hospital bracelet that proves it. Can’t believe my wrist was ever that small. Can’t believe I had a pink card above my vegetable-drawer-looking baby bed that read “Baby Girl Brown.” Lucky for me, Marcus couldn’t say my name when he learned to talk, so he started calling me “Eva,” and soon the rest of my family did too.

My nohkum says I’m lucky my mom didn’t choose a name like Lived. Get it? Lived spelled backwards? Not even going to say it. Nohkum thinks this is the funniest joke ever. She throws her head back and roars with laughter that comes from a deep happy place inside her that Shirley, my mom, her daughter, never gets to see. I laugh with her so she can feel happy about making me laugh.

I don’t think Nohkum has much to be happy about. Her daughter is one of the town drunks who brings home shame instead of food. Nohkum’s never said it out loud, but I imagine that’s what she’s thinking. So, I try to help Nohkum as much as I can and I laugh at her jokes, even when they aren’t funny. I know Marcus and I are the only reason Nohkum is sticking around.

I have so much love for my nohkum and I tell her all the time. She has a big, soft belly that’s squishy and comforting when she hugs me. Her favourite T-shirt says, “Bingo players make better lovers.” The idea of Nohkum being a lover grosses me out. She must have been, thirty-seven years ago,

because she had Shirley. But I prefer to think that she's like the Virgin Mary, only funnier and a better cook, who can make soup out of an empty fridge.

She is, I think, the only reason we have food to eat most days. Nohkum makes the most delicious soup and the softest bannock in the world. Shirley calls it "hangover soup" and goes back for seconds and thirds. It's a good thing Nohkum's soup pot is huge. She doesn't really have a recipe for the soup because it's made of anything and everything she can find. But no matter what goes in, the result is a whole pot full of soup brimming with smells that have seeped into the walls. I love the smell of our kitchen. It smells like Nohkum, so I guess Nohkum smells like delicious soup. Better than smelling like old stale beer. Better than smelling like Shirley.

Shirley walks around the house looking angry all the time, but I know when she goes out in the world she's not like that. I don't talk to her if I can help it. Nohkum doesn't agree with me not talking to Shirley, but she says she understands why I'm making that choice. One day, she says, I will talk to my mom. I just stare blankly ahead because I don't want to break Nohkum's heart by yelling "Not on your life!" at the top of my lungs.

My cat, Toofie, sidles up next to me in my hiding place under the steps and starts to purr. I found her in this exact spot two years ago. It seemed like no one really wanted her, either. She was shivering and cold and happened to be hiding from the rain at the same time I was hiding from Shirley. And so I brought her home.

She's a pretty smart cat. She knows to make herself scarce if Shirley is drunk. One of her ears looks like something took

a bite out of it. She is white with brown and black spots and a tiny pink nose. Two of her paws are brown. The first time Nohkum saw her, she said something about her “two feet.” Marcus asked if her name was Toofie, and that was it. I don’t know which is worse: Toofie or Nevaeh.

Toofie and I wait in the rain, our tummies grumbling. I think about how I used to go to my friend Melody’s after school sometimes and we’d have hot chocolate with cookies, homemade ones that her mom, Becka, baked. I can’t imagine Shirley or Nohkum making homemade cookies. One time Nohkum made the ones that you slice from a tube. They were good, but not as good as Becka’s. My mouth waters as I think about those cookies.

I haven’t talked to Mel since the end of school last year. We became best friends in grade 5 when she moved to Hope, even though Mel’s the opposite of me. She’s tall and bubbly with the whitest, straightest smile I have ever seen. She could charm and disarm a person with her smile and her soft voice, so completely different from my gravelly voice. (I’d make a great short order cook, yelling out “Order up!”) I asked her why she moved from Come By Chance, Newfoundland, to Hope, where nobody has a chance; she just laughed and called me crazy. (I looked it up! There actually is a place called Come By Chance.)

But we had a big fight about how I treat Shirley, how I avoid her and never call her “Mom.” Mel couldn’t handle that I’m not all mushy with Shirley, like she is with her mom. But Mel doesn’t know what it’s like to have a mom who’s not like a mom at all—and she definitely doesn’t know the whole truth about Shirley. She’s never even been in our house, even

after all the years that we've been friends. That's something I tried hard to avoid. And sharing the details of Shirley's endless screwups? No way.

Anyway, Mel had the nerve to call me selfish, well, to yell it out actually, in front of everyone at school during lunch. Maybe not everyone, I guess, but the other people eating outside at the picnic tables. Still, it was embarrassing. When I told Nohkum, she said being a human on this earth is all about life lessons. I don't know what the lesson is, though. I just know that since our fight I eat a lot fewer homemade cookies and spend a lot more time at home with my m-o-t-h-e-r, an alcoholic who doesn't give a crap about me.

With Toofie snuggled beside me, I pull my notebook out of my backpack. I like getting all my thoughts down on paper. It's one thing in my life that I can control.

WELFARE WEDNESDAY

*Farewell Wednesday
The day she takes off
The day she decides it's okay
To leave her kids behind
Even when the cat has no kibble
And her daughter is counting on her.
Welfare Wednesday
The day she disappears
Like she has a job
And she's gone for normal reasons
Except she comes home super sick
Super sore, super poor
Super depressed.*

*The cat still has no food.
She hands me five bucks and says,
Get the cat a small bag.*

This poem sucks and so does being poor.

Monkeys in the Bannock, Poetry in the Brain

WHY DOES IT have to rain so much? Even if I wear two of everything, I'm always cold. I hate being cold. What I really need is a new pair of shoes and a new jacket. I don't have a raincoat or even a warm coat—well, that's not exactly true: I do have a winter coat that once belonged to someone else. It looks like a men's jacket and has the logo of some company that probably went out of business a million years ago, maybe even in the seventies. Nohkum got it from the secondhand store last year and I thanked her for it. But I never wore it. I would rather wear two zip-up hoodies to school than an old man's jacket, so it hangs in the back of the closet, too big for anyone in our house but me.

Walking to school and walking home again in the cold, in the rain, is hard. There's a public transit system here but it's mainly to get to other towns and cities, like Agassiz or Chilliwack or even Vancouver. Getting anywhere in Hope on the bus is almost impossible. So I walk. Our house is a half-hour walk from the school, so I spend almost an hour a day walking. That's a lot of thinking time.

Even with all that thinking and walking, I am still overweight. "You're not overweight, my girl. You are pleasantly plump and not like those little stick boys and girls," Nohkum says. Nohkum is also pleasantly plump, but not as pleasantly plump as me. I think saying someone is "pleasantly plump" is a nice way of calling them fat. Shirley isn't fat at all. In fact, she is unpleasantly thin. I think it's her diet of cigarettes and alcohol. Who lives on cigarettes and alcohol? Shirley does.

One day, Marcus asked, "Why are you fat, Eva?" I wasn't mad at him; he didn't have hurtful intentions. I told him, "There's more of me to love," 'cause I want him to believe that. I wouldn't mind believing that too. He said, "I like how soft you and Nohkum are. Am I soft too?" I just told him we're like that because we love to eat bannock, and I wrote a poem about it for him.

BANNOCK AND MORE BANNOCK

(FOR MARCUS)

I am soft and fluffy

Like fresh bannock

Fried in grease

Hot, fat, and round

Bannock.

Bannock galore.
I want more!
Bannock and jam!
Bannock and ham!
Bannock and soup!
Bannock and sugar!
Bannock and cinnamon!
Bannock galore.
I love bannock.
Fluffy, round, and brown
Like me!

When I get to school, kids are milling around, smiling and laughing. Some have umbrellas, some have raincoats. Some of the girls are wearing WAMIS rainboots (pronounced “whammies”; the company’s actually called Walk A Mile In my Shoes). I saw those boots at the mall when I went with Mel last spring and they cost over a hundred dollars. I’d never spend that much on a pair of rainboots—would never have that much to spend on a pair of rainboots—but they do look really good and come in lots of colours.

Mel is one of those people who doesn’t like to wear name-brand clothing. She told me she doesn’t want to support conglomerate corporations and child labour. I told her I agree that those things aren’t good, and I do. But I think I’d still like to own a pair of WAMIS if I had the chance. All the girls at school are wearing black boots, but I’d choose purple.

I walk into the school. It’s warmer inside than outside, but never warm enough to get the cold out of my bones. My first class is grade 9 English and we get to do a lot of writing.

We're studying all the different kinds of poetry out there. They all sound so foreign: sonnet, ballad, ghazal. It's not my kind of writing. I prefer free verse; it's like my thoughts flow straight onto the paper. Not that I want everyone to know my thoughts, which is why I never share in class when Mr. Perry asks us to. I think he's the only teacher who might understand poetry, pimples, and poverty, but I'm not interested in letting the other kids know how I feel.

There are a few kids that share in class, I guess because they think their writing is actually good. Some of it is and some of it is . . . not. But no matter how bad it is, Mr. Perry always thanks them for sharing. He treats us like our writing matters.

Today Mel shares a poem about her grandma dying. The love she had for her grandma shines in the poem. I wish we were still talking. I didn't even know her grandma died. Wouldn't a best friend know something like that? When Mel walks back to her chair, I see her face is red and I feel sad for her, but she doesn't make eye contact with me.

One boy reads the poem he wrote about waiting until grad to get his new car. I wasn't really interested in that poem, but the other kids laughed when he talked about never getting caught walking in the rain again or having to take the bus and sit next to a smelly kid. Of course, Mandy turns to whisper to her friend that I'm never on the bus so that's not a problem, just loud enough for me to hear.

Nohkum says to ignore mean people and they'll get bored and go away. I haven't seen that happen yet, because Mandy has been bothering me since she moved here from Vancouver in grade 4. What's the difference between kids in grade 3 and kids in grade 4? Nohkum once told me that kids are pure

until they turn eight and after that they learn to lie. All of a sudden, they realize they can be mean and start figuring out ways to get away with it. I'm not sure how she knows this, but it sounds about right. I was so glad when Mel moved to the school in grade 5 because seeing her gave me something to look forward to, instead of just dreading the next mean thing Mandy would do or say. Plus, Mel wasn't afraid of telling Mandy to get lost.

When we were in grade 7, Mel made me cupcakes for my birthday. As Mel was carrying them to the front of the room, Mandy stuck out her foot and tripped her. Somehow Mel managed to drop to her knees but keep the tray of cupcakes from falling. She calmly got up, set the cupcakes on someone's desk, took one out, and walked over to Mandy. "I guess you'd prefer a squished cupcake, huh?" she said, and with that, she plopped a cupcake upside-down on Mandy's desk, smearing icing everywhere. Mandy was speechless, for once. It was pretty awesome.

The lunch bell rings, and Mr. Perry asks me to wait a minute. I know I'm not in trouble, so I'm curious why he wants to talk to me. Mandy looks back at me, staring and smirking. I have no idea how she can be so intimidating and mean in front of the teachers without them ever noticing.

I stand next to Mr. Perry's desk, still cold from the morning walk in the biting rain. He smiles at me and enthusiastically pulls a sheet of paper out of his briefcase. Mr. Perry does pretty much everything enthusiastically. "Nevaeh, *Medicine Wheel Magazine* is running a poetry contest. They want youth to write about what it means or feels like to be Indigenous. I've looked at last year's winning poems, and I know

this is something you have a really good chance of winning—you're a great writer! Are you interested? If you'd like, I could edit your poem for you. And first prize is a thousand dollars.”

I take the flyer and stare at it. A thousand dollars is a lot of money. First, I think I could actually get purple WAMIS, but then I think I'd rather buy Nohkum a new bed and a heating blanket for her arthritis. Some days it takes a long time for Nohkum to get out of bed, especially when it rains. My mind is racing. I thank Mr. Perry and leave the room.

As I walk away, I shake my head—like I could ever win a poetry contest! I can't enter a poem about soup and bannock or holes in my shoes or my drunken mom in a contest. But that's what it's like to be me. What could I write that wouldn't suck? *Thanks, Mr. Perry, for sticking more fluffy ideas in my head!* I can't afford fluffy ideas. I can't even afford to buy lunch.

Oops, there go the monkeys in my brain again, having a party I didn't invite them to. “Monkeys in the brain” is what Nohkum calls it when I can't stop the negative thoughts that go round and round in my head: *I am not good enough, I am too fat, I am stupid, no one will ever love me, my own mother doesn't love me, and I will never have a boyfriend because I'm ugly.* I don't tell Nohkum all the things that go through my mind because I think it would hurt her to know how I beat myself up.

Nohkum says the monkeys jump from thought to thought to thought, and I imagine a whole bunch of them in a big room jumping all over their beds like trampolines. She says I have to be kind to the monkeys and gently put them in their cages. I imagine cages in the back of my brain, but they don't have locks. The monkeys can come out anytime. But when

they start wreaking havoc in my head, they need to rest on their beds and give me a break.

I don't have anything to eat for lunch today, so I go to my usual spot under the stairs in the basement to wait out the lunch period. I carefully read the flyer Mr. Perry gave me. Second prize is three hundred dollars and third is one hundred and fifty. All the winners will be published in the magazine. But I couldn't win . . . could I? I think about what I could do with a thousand dollars, but . . . but . . . I shake my head and shove the flyer into the bottom of my backpack.

When the bell rings I head to my next class, which is gym. I hardly ever go because the PE teacher says if you don't have gym clothes then you shouldn't come to class. But Nohkum made me promise that I'd start going to all my classes, and I want to keep that promise. She tells me it will make her happy if I just try my best. It's a good thing she feels that way, because I am close to failing a couple of subjects. So today I'll go to gym. Why we have to run laps and sweat like pigs is beyond me, and why we need to do that to graduate makes no sense. How is throwing a basketball or serving a volleyball going to set me up for life? They should teach us how to do taxes, because I know that is one thing I'll have to do when I'm an adult. Nowhere on my resumé will I mention that I've scored one basket in my entire life.

When I walk into the gym, I see it's set up for basketball. Mandy is in her gym clothes—cute shorts and a matching T-shirt. Of course. I walk in and pile my stuff against the wall, and the teacher tells us to start running laps. Great! I hate laps even more than I hate Mandy. No, wait a minute, that's not true.

After the second lap, going into the third, I am huffing and puffing and my side hurts. I'm sweating and it's not the cute kind. Mandy, who is on her fourth or fifth lap, passes me and she doesn't even look tired. As she runs by, she whispers loudly (which is only possible for Mandy—I think it's her superpower), "Move it, fat ass." She says it so casually that I second-guess whether I've heard her right. But then I hear her friends laugh and I know she said it. I stop and put my hands on my knees and try to find my breath again. I can't even tell Mandy to fuck off because she's already on the other side of the gym.

After we finish our laps, the teacher splits us into teams. Of course, I'm opposite Mandy. I've never liked basketball, but I'll give it a good try for Nohkum. I promised. Promises are big to me and Nohkum: we promised never to lie to each other and we promised never to break a promise. I shouldn't have promised her, but I did. Making a promise in one moment isn't the same as living up to it in a different moment. But I can't back out now.

The game goes okay, since I just stay out of the way and try to shuffle my feet a little. Mandy is making baskets left and right. Her team wins and it's finally over. I gather up my stuff, feeling proud of myself because now I can tell Nohkum I went to gym class, and I even tried. She really wants me to pass high school and go to college. I want that too, but it doesn't seem real for me. I told Nohkum that after high school I'll get a job and help her and Marcus, and she got angry and declared that I *was* going to college. That's when she made me promise I'd try. So here I am, sweaty, out of breath, and a fat ass (according to Mandy).

I'm about to walk out the gym door when something hits me in the back of the head. I bring my hand up to my head, turn around, and see a basketball bouncing away from me. Mandy and two of her friends are pointing and laughing. What do I do? I run out the door, tears stinging my eyes. Mel's in the hall and I run past her and don't even look back to see her reaction. What if she's laughing too?

I walk home in the rain, which seems to be the only constant in my life. I am humiliated and angry, cold and hungry. I'm glad for the rain because it falls on my face and blends in with my tears. No one will know I am crying, not even Nohkum. It makes her sad when I cry so I try hard not to.

The Cat's Meow Soup

SIT AT THE old abandoned house and wait. I've pretty much memorized the graffiti covering its rotting wooden siding. The artwork is amazing and if I could draw anything but stick people, stick dogs, and stick pigs, I think I could add something to it. If I could do graffiti, I could tag Mandy's house and write something like "Mandy is a bitch"—or even worse. As I think of all the things I could possibly write, I wait and listen for sounds coming from my house.

Toofie appears from around the corner and rubs her soaking-wet body against my legs. I pick her up and cuddle her to my chest. She's shivering, so I slip her into my hoodie and zip it up. Toofie seems to appreciate this; she purrs and stays still. I listen closely but the house is quiet. I am relieved because I won't have to deal with Shirley. I'm so hungry and I know Nohkum will have food waiting for me.

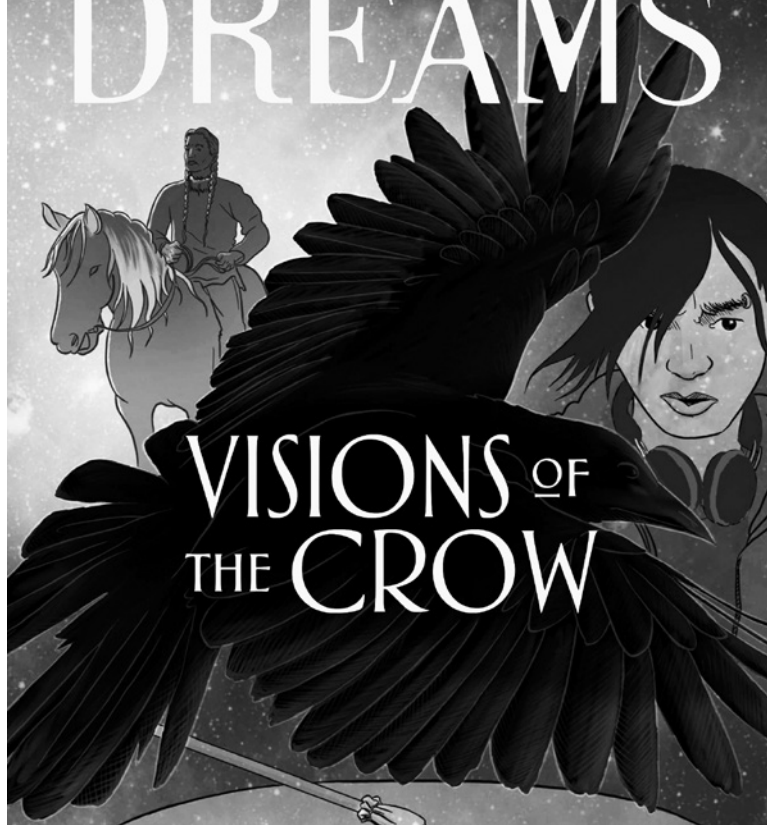
WANDA JOHN-KEHEWIN (she, her, hers) is a Cree writer who uses her work to understand and respond to the near destruction of First Nations cultures, languages, and traditions. When she first arrived in Vancouver on a Greyhound bus, she was a pregnant nineteen-year-old carrying little more than a bag of chips, a bottle of pop, thirty dollars, and hope. After many years travelling (well, mostly stumbling) along her healing journey, Wanda brings her personal experiences to share with others. Now a published poet and fiction author, she writes to stand in her truth and to share that truth openly. Wanda is the mother of five children, one dog, two cats, and one angelfish, and grandmother to one super-cute granddog. She calls Coquitlam home until the summertime, when she treks to the Alberta prairies to visit family and learn more about Cree culture and tradition.

VOLUME 1

DREAMS



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FOR EVA BROWN, life feels lonely and small. Her mother, Shirley, drinks and yells all the time. She's the target of the popular mean girl, and her only friend doesn't want to talk to her anymore. All of it would be unbearable if it weren't for her cat, her beloved nohkum's comfort soup, and her writing, which no one will ever see.

When Nohkum is hospitalized, it's up to Shirley to keep things together for Eva and her younger brother. But when Shirley makes a terrible mistake, Eva finds herself in a group home with only her notebook and her own swirling thoughts for company. Weighed down by an avalanche of hurt feelings and the never-ending rain, Eva wonders if she'll ever be reunited with her family again.

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