

KUMAMUK

Buzz on the reserve was that the wrestlers were definitely coming. The chief had worked it that eleven of the monsters would stay and do battle in three events spread over seven days. Every Cree on the James Bay coast was invited and with the ice road melted to thick mud, the only way to the reserve was by air. Air Creebec had already added extra flights. People for three hundred kilometres were coming. Such an event had never been attempted in so remote an area, and the council and promoters stood to make some very good money.

But money was not what interested young Noah. He'd seen the names on the card. The one and only Chief Thunderbolt, Protector of the Indian Nations, was coming. He was the warrior who'd developed the Strong Bow, and that move was feared by all his opponents. Although Noah had not heard of the other wrestlers, he'd seen Chief Thunderbolt on television before; the children had been allowed to meet in the community hall every other Saturday, if they'd done well in school that week, to gaze at the television and the wrestlers battling on the screen. And now next week, real live wrestlers were going to be in that very same community hall, fighting

it out right in front of Noah. Not many events in Noah's eight years of living had seemed so exciting. He couldn't wait.

The day of the match, all of the smaller children were horrified, Noah among them. The wrestlers had brought bright lights and very loud music and an announcer shouting through a microphone. Nearly-naked men paraded into the packed room, hollering and beating chests and slapping hugely muscled arms. For the most part their flesh was ghost-white, but a few were bronzed dark as the Indians who surrounded them, and there was one as black and shiny as a Canada goose's beak. Everyone had expected them to be larger than normal men, but here in real life they seemed as monstrous as *windigos*, and their howls and shouts were just as scary.

The announcer continued rumbling into his microphone. Children clapped their hands over their ears at the booming voice. Noah looked around him at the crowd, at the children retreating from the front rows as the huge men scrambled up into the ring and continued their shouting and slapping. Noah was the only one to move forward. He stood in the third row all alone, transfixed.

There was a fat monster with a straw hat and overalls; the announcer called him Giant Haystacks. Another had long greasy hair and black makeup covering his eyes and was called the Diesel Machine. Another wore some kind of fancy army uniform, skin tight, with tall black boots. He had a tiny moustache and in his hand he carried a short stiff whip. The announcer called this one Fritz Von Schnitzel.

The next had a crewcut that was dazzling white. He seemed as if he were made of bronze and his arms and legs were as big as some of the kids watching. His stomach looked to Noah like the rippled wake his father's motorboat left in

the river in summertime. This man the announcer named Beef Wellington. Beef Wellington looked straight at Noah, curved his arms in front of him till all the muscles in his neck and shoulders and chest and arms bulged, and roared. Noah couldn't help but smile at the attention. He wanted to lift his arm and wave back to Beef Wellington, but he was too shy.

The next giant wore a scarf made of pink feathers wrapped around his neck and a tight pink bodysuit. His eyelashes were long and black. His cheeks were red. When the announcer introduced him as the Pink Panther, he ran his hand over his long blond hair as if to make it neater than it already was. Then he carefully lifted one hand to wave as he blew kisses with the other. Noah heard some of the grown-ups behind him giggle.

The announcer's voice boomed out again, "One of the natural wonders of our modern world, the Orderlies!" Two men, identical, jumped up onto the ropes at the same time. Everything about them was exactly the same — their blue doctor pants, the doctor masks hanging around their necks — and each had the same tattoo of a naked woman on his left bicep. Then came the black man. His skin glistened with oil; his muscles flexed, detailed and massive; his bald head had a single vein standing out on the front of it. The announcer called this one De Stubborn Headache. Noah had never seen a live black man before, and remained as silent as the rest of the crowd in the gym.

Next to take centre ring was a mountain of flesh. He too was bald but, in contrast to the other bald one, he was white as the underbelly of a fish. Two small eyes peered out from his huge head. Noah wondered how this one could move in the suit of fat that covered him. The announcer simply called him Bulba. But it was the last two that most caught Noah's

attention. The first one, Kid Wikked, wore a sequined mask and a white cowboy hat, white boots and white bikini bottoms. And then there was the other. Noah's idol, brown as the crowd, wearing a loincloth and tall moccasins. On his head was a war bonnet, the eagle feathers reaching down his back to his knees. On his cheeks were colourful lines of war paint. When the announcer shouted the name Chief Thunderbolt, the wrestler let out a war cry that shot straight to Noah, straight into his heart. Suddenly, Noah saw his whole fantastic life sprawl out in front of him. It was at that moment that he knew exactly where his life would take him.

Before the children and adults in the gym had a chance to recover from this onslaught of muscle and tight shorts and makeup, most of the men jumped from the ring and retreated, whooping, to their dressing rooms in back, leaving two warriors, Fritz Von Schnitzel and the Pink Panther, with the announcer between them.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer boomed, stretching each word to breaking point, "our first match of the afternoon is a grudge match extraordinaire." Each of the men stood restlessly in his own corner, shaking out his arms and legs. "It's not a secret," the announcer continued, "that there's no love lost between these two men. In fact, Fritz Von Schnitzel claims there's no room in the wrestling world for, as he puts it, such an abomination as the Pink Panther." At the mention of his name, Von Schnitzel clicked his boot heels together and looked down his nose at the audience. "Von Schnitzel comes in weighing a respectable 238 pounds. The Pink Panther, 252."

The Pink Panther turned and waved daintily to the crowd, flipping his scarf of feathers behind him. Von Schnitzel strode quickly across the ring and pounced on the Panther's back,

driving his elbow into the pink man's shoulder. The two fell to the mat with an echoing boom. Noah gasped. Von Schnitzel knelt across the Pink Panther's body with his knee. Each time he landed, the ring shook and a mighty *bam!* erupted. Noah didn't know how the poor Panther was able to take such a savage beating. He looked behind him at the children covering their ears and eyes. Some of the teenage boys smiled, and John Goodwin even shouted out, but other than that, the audience was silent and staring, as if they weren't sure they should be witnessing this.

Fritz linked his own arms under the arms and over the neck of the Pink Panther in a full nelson and arched the Panther's back up in an unnatural bend. Noah recognized this from TV as the dreaded Nazi Clutch. The Pink Panther's face twisted in pain. His makeup was a mess from the sweat, or maybe tears, Noah couldn't tell. The ref knelt and watched the battle carefully from up close. Von Schnitzel released the Panther, rolled him onto his back and lay across his chest. The ref, down on his stomach now, pounded with his palm on the mat, "One ... two ...," and then the Pink Panther roared to life, arching his back like a salmon leaping rapids, throwing Von Schnitzel from him. The Panther was up now, driving his pink boot down with echoing thumps onto Von Schnitzel's chest. After what seemed to Noah an unbelievably long torture session, the Panther dropped to his knees, straddled Von Schnitzel, held his shoulders down on the mat and listened as the ref counted. When he shouted, "Three!" the Pink Panther leaned down and kissed the knocked-out Fritz on the cheek. Noah heard the crowd gasp. The Pink Panther pranced around the stage as Von Schnitzel groggily pulled himself up and retreated to the dressing room.

The other matches came just as quickly and as furiously.

Giant Haystacks battled Bulba, two mountains of flesh colliding and falling with such a shaking crash that Noah was worried the ring would collapse. Bulba was disqualified for gouging Haystacks' eyes. That bothered Noah. Haystacks seemed like such a friendly man.

By the third fight, Noah was keeping a tally of the good guys versus the bad. The Pink Panther was funny. Therefore he was clearly good. Fritz Von Schnitzel reminded Noah of Mr. Daguierre, his French teacher, who had moved up here from Montreal and was mean and spoke with a thick accent. Von Schnitzel clearly fell into the bad category. Giant Haystacks was very friendly, calling out, "Howdy, y'all!" to the crowd and waving his straw hat. He was good. Bulba was ugly and a cheater. There was no question where he belonged.

The last fight of the afternoon was not so easy to weigh. Although the Diesel Machine had greasy long hair and black makeup that made him look evil, Beef Wellington, whose hair shone like the sun and skin glowed, strutted around, shouting to the crowd and bragging about himself. Noah didn't want to judge these two too quickly.

They were by far the strongest and most athletic, climbing to the top of the ropes and soaring off them like birds. And they were well-matched. As soon as it appeared that one was doomed, on the verge of a three count, he would arch his full body and throw the one on top into the air. The momentum of the battle switched many times. As the match neared its time limit, there seemed no clear winner to Noah. Beef Wellington grabbed the Machine's arm and whipped him incredibly fast into the ropes, but he came slingshotting back, running full force into Beef with a slap and the two would go crashing down.

Noah saw that by now the crowd was captivated, and in

watching intently they remained very quiet. Grandmothers leaned to one another and whispered in Cree, the children covered their eyes when the action became too fierce, the older hunters watched and nodded among themselves when an especially athletic move was made. But everyone remained respectfully quiet with the final bell. The ref announced a draw, and both men shouted and made menacing movements towards each other before stalking off to their rooms.

"The second of the three matches this week will be Wednesday evening," the announcer called as the Indians stood in the rows of chairs, wondering whether it was time to leave. The announcer climbed from the ring.

As the crowd filtered out, Noah tried to build up his nerve. Gerald and Thomas ran up to where he stood, close to the ring.

"Ever brave, you," Gerald said.

"Ever crazy! Did they get their sweat on you?" Thomas asked. Noah shook his head proudly.

"No. It was real loud, though," he answered.

"Come on, you," Gerald said. "We're going to the river. Breakup's any time now."

"We can play wrestling there," Thomas continued.

Noah just shook his head again. "I'll meet you later," he told them. "I got to do something right now."

The other two shrugged and ran off, excited from the action they'd just seen. The long winter was finally gone and the air was warm enough for sweaters or long-sleeved shirts. Winter's only reminder was the river, wide and white, still a couple of feet of solid ice but threatening to bust open any time now, as it did every May.

Noah walked around the foot of the ring, running his hand along its canvas floor that stood to his chin. He saw himself

paced like a wolf in its centre, waiting for the foolish opponent who would challenge him; saw himself launching on Bulba or Von Schnitzel and staring into their scared eyes as he sunk his claws in. Noah broke from the ring and headed to the wrestlers' dressing rooms.

"What's with the quiet crowd?" he heard Diesel Machine ask from behind a half-open door.

"That's the spookiest fucking thing I ever witnessed," another voice spoke out, one that Noah didn't recognize.

"Must be an Indian thing," someone else added. "They ain't never seen anything like this before. Half of them have never even been to a city."

Noah walked in. The men stared down at him. Most of the ones who'd been introduced were here in the big room. Almost all of them stood around in normal clothes now, but they still looked gigantic.

"Hey," Bulba said. His voice was high-pitched, almost like a woman's.

"Hey kid," Beef Wellington said, followed by the others. Noah just stood and stared up at them.

"You want an autograph or something?" Diesel Machine asked finally, the other men laughing.

"Maybe he doesn't speak English," Beef said.

"I want to join you," Noah blurted. The men looked at him and laughed louder.

"You might want to gain a little weight first," Giant Haystacks rumbled. He was still in his overalls, but with a shirt on underneath.

"How much you weigh?" asked Beef Wellington. "Seventy, seventy-five pounds?"

"Almost eighty," Noah lied. The men looked to one another.

"Let's see your muscles," Bulba said.

"Yeah, make a muscle for us," Von Schnitzel said. His accent didn't seem so strong up close. Noah took off his jacket, pulled up his sleeves and made a muscle with each arm, shaking from the effort. The men whistled.

"Not bad, not bad," Diesel Machine said.

"You look like a strong young brave," Chief Thunderbolt spoke. He had been sitting behind the other men, but now stood up. Noah stared at the big brown man, his war paint gone and his black hair slicked back. Noah had never been called that before, but he remembered someone saying it in a cowboy movie once.

"I'm pretty brave," he answered.

The Pink Panther walked in from behind, asking, "Who's the punk?"

"A kid from here. Says he wants to become a wrestler," Diesel Machine answered. The two men walked to one another and briefly touched hands.

"That's real cute," the Pink Panther said. "You're not big enough yet," he continued, squatting down on his massive legs to look at Noah. "Just eat a healthy diet and in a couple years you get back in touch with us."

"You got a restaurant on the reserve?" Bulba asked. "I've got to feed the beast." He patted his gigantic stomach. Noah nodded, staring at it.

"Yeah, we do. It's in the council building. I'll show you where it is." The men all stood and Noah led them out of the gym and down the gravel road to the restaurant. As he walked in front, leading this procession of giants past the little houses and the cemetery along the river, he felt as proud and important as he ever had.

Sunday morning before church, Noah's grandfather took him on their walk. They walked where they always did: along the Attawapiskat River; south along a path that Grandfather told him stretched 600 kilometres to the nearest highway, which in turn supposedly ran the whole length of Canada. Noah had traced the route on an atlas in school, from his little dot of a reserve on James Bay down to Moosonee and then farther south to Cochrane and the fabled highway. It really did stretch in either direction from Cochrane, like Grandfather said. Going east, Noah followed it as it dipped down to Toronto, then Montreal to New Brunswick to Halifax and the ocean. Going west, the highway stretched out to Thunder Bay, then Winnipeg, where an uncle lived. The highway's red line ran on through the prairies, then the mountains, before disappearing at Vancouver and the other ocean.

On today's walk, he and Grandfather watched the ice's movement on the river. Although the weather was warm, the ice refused to give up its hold over the water. "Any day now," his grandfather said, "you'll hear the cracking from kilometres away and think it's thunder, and if you don't run, you will miss saying goodbye to the ice for another year."

Grandfather pointed out some early geese arriving at their summer grounds, a small v that looked tiny so far up in the air. "We'll go to goose camp soon," he said, and Noah thought about the white canvas tent the family would live in for a week and the goose blinds he would help to repair and then sit quietly with Grandfather, waiting for geese to see the decoys set out in the water a few yards from the blinds.

They walked farther down the river without saying much, and Noah wanted to tell his grandfather about these wrestlers who were on the reserve for a full week and about the

excitement of that first show and how Noah wanted so bad to become one of them. But Grandfather wouldn't understand. Maybe he could get Grandfather to come to Wednesday night's show to see for himself. After all, this was such a rare thing, such a special event, that people from other reserves had flown in to witness it, and every house, practically, was keeping a visitor.

"I have to get you back home so you're not late for church," Grandfather said. Noah hated church as much as Grandfather, but both of Noah's parents were members of the Pentecostal mission now. The only thing Noah liked about church was when someone got touched by the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues. Whoever it happened to either stood straight as a board and babbled, or shook and sweated and spat with every strange word. This didn't happen often, though. One man who came to speak at the church from somewhere down south spoke of a snakepit where the preacher would stand and never be bitten by the writhing, poisonous creatures. If his preacher would do that, then Noah would have no problems going.

Grandfather told Noah that he didn't like the church because it didn't seem to be doing them any good. There was hardly anyone anymore who did the sweat lodge or knew of the shaking tent or feared *windigos*. Grandfather said he had probably been the last one on reserve to go on a vision quest in order to become a man. He had gone out for six days without eating or drinking anything. A lynx had come to him on the next day and told him everything he would need to live life properly. The lynx had just sat down and begun talking to him with a human voice. Grandfather had wanted Noah's father to do a vision quest, but the residential school had forbidden it. Grandfather talked to Noah now of the same thing. He was

trying to prepare him, Noah knew, and Noah waited anxiously for the time when he would be ready.

All of the boys at school on Monday played wrestling during afternoon recess. Everyone wanted to be either Diesel Machine or Chief Thunderbolt. Noah worked hard on his Strong Bow and got so good at it that he made Gerald cry.

"I saw you with the wrestlers on Saturday," Thomas said to Noah. "Ever crazy, you! You look like a midget beside them!" Gerald and Thomas laughed at that. It didn't bother Noah. He was growing. Last night after church he had eaten so much dinner that his mother told him to stop.

At the end of recess, one of the older boys pile-drove one of the smaller ones, so the principal banned wrestling in the schoolyard. He came on the intercom just before school let out. "An important announcement to students," he said. "Nick Lazarus was hurt in the yard today when another student attempted a wrestling move on him. Keep in mind, students, you are not professionals. From here on in, you will face suspension if you are caught wrestling on school grounds. Tomorrow we will have professional wrestlers currently staying on reserve come to our classrooms to discuss the dangers of their job."

Gerald and Thomas and Noah turned in their desks and looked at one another. Noah gave the other two a thumbs-up.

At dinner, Noah told his parents of the upcoming visit. "They're going to come to our class and talk to us," he told his mother between forkfuls of baked beans. "Maybe they'll show us how to properly do some moves."

"You're not allowed no wrestling moves at school anymore," his mother said.

"John Goodwin pile-driven Nick Lazarus and gave him De Stubborn Headache," Noah said. He looked at his parents but they didn't get it. "Are you going to come with me to wrestling on Wednesday night?" he asked after a while. His father looked up at Noah from his food.

"We got church on Wednesday night," his mother answered. "A preacher's come all the way from Toronto to preach the Lord's word."

"Oh," Noah answered. "You'll miss the wrestling match."

"You're coming to church too," his father said with the tone dangerous to argue with. Noah felt his heart sink.

The days were already longer. Noah got out of his house as soon as he could. He wanted to sneak around, see if he could spot any of the wrestlers wandering about. Some of the men had taken the wrestlers out all day Sunday to ice fish for pickerel. Although they were staying at the trailers by the council office that the chief called a hotel, Noah hadn't spotted them around. Word was that they were working out at the school gymnasium. Noah rode his bicycle that way, but as he passed the restaurant he saw a glimpse of Chief Thunderbolt. Noah got off his bike and quietly walked in the door. There at tables were Chief Thunderbolt, Kid Wikked, Beef Wellington and the Orderlies.

Noah couldn't believe who was sitting there with them. His teacher, Miss Crane, the grade five teacher, Miss Nelson, and the grade eight teacher, Miss Reynolds, sat laughing and smiling, looking like three dwarves surrounded by the five big men. Noah took a seat by the counter and watched them. The teachers giggled like the little girls did at recess, then stared up with big eyes at the men. Noah strained to hear what they were saying, but could hear only the laughing clearly. After a while, the Orderlies got up and left. "We gotta quit hanging

out together," one said to the other. "Together we creep them out. We're never gonna score this way."

Noah looked back to the others, all paired off now: Miss Crane with Chief Thunderbolt, Miss Nelson with Kid Wikked and Miss Reynolds with Beef Wellington. He decided to chance it and moved behind a fake bush close to the couples.

"How about cocktails at my trailer?" Miss Reynolds spoke up. She whispered the words loudly. All the others seemed very happy with the idea.

"Don't spread the word around," Miss Crane said. "This is a dry reserve after all, and even if the chief throws the best parties around, we'd be in a world of trouble if anyone found out." All of them laughed quietly. Noah wished he knew what cocktails were.

"Let's go," Beef Wellington said, slapping the table and standing up. Noah moved quickly back to his chair.

"What tribe are you?" Miss Crane asked Chief Thunderbolt as they all stood and moved to the door.

"I'm Puerto Rican, actually," he answered.

"Yeah, he's a spic," Kid Wikked said, and they all laughed. Noah hadn't heard of the Spic band before. As they passed by, Noah watched Miss Crane holding Chief Thunderbolt's arm, staring up into his eyes. Chief Thunderbolt looked straight down at Noah and gave him a big thumbs-up; then he walked out the door with Noah's teacher and the others into the night.

Gerald and Thomas and Noah sat by one another in class all day, passing notes about which wrestlers they wanted to come visit their room. Gerald was hoping Giant Haystacks and Bulba would show up because he wanted to see if they could fit through the door. Thomas wanted De Stubbhorn Headache to show up because he wanted to look up close at his black skin.

Noah had told him that Headache's palms were light-coloured like theirs, but Thomas wouldn't believe it. Noah sent a note saying that Chief Thunderbolt would show up because Miss Crane had a crush on him. He drew a picture of the two of them kissing, but Gerald said he couldn't tell what it was of.

At recess, Noah and some of the other braver boys went down the hill by the fence where the teachers couldn't see them and worked on their wrestling moves. Noah easily defeated the younger boys and with only a few minutes of recess left, found himself facing John Goodwin, who everyone called Pile-Drive King now. John tripped Noah and jumped on him, his weight easily holding Noah down. He placed his hands around Noah's neck and squeezed.

"Say uncle," John said, staring down. "Tap out or black out." Noah struggled for air and, on the verge of panicking, tried to see in his head what Chief Thunderbolt would do. Then he lifted his legs high up and caught one over John's head. With a sitting-up motion, Noah leveraged the Pile-Drive King down so that he was on his back with Noah's legs snaked around his neck. Noah squeezed and John tapped the ground frantically. The other boys cheered as the school bell rang, and Noah jumped to his feet. He'd beaten John — John who weighed much more and who all the younger children were scared of.

During math, Miss Crane interrupted the students. "Our special guests have arrived," she said. Noah looked up to see Kid Wikked and Chief Thunderbolt walk in. All the kids stopped what they were doing and stared up with big eyes.

"How," Chief Thunderbolt said to the kids, raising his hand to them. Everyone stared back.

"Howdy, y'all," Kid Wikked shouted, making a six-gun

with each thumb and forefinger, shooting the children with imaginary bullets.

"How do your people give greetings?" Chief Thunderbolt asked the class. The children stared back at him, too afraid to answer.

"We say, 'Hiya, how are you?'" Annie finally said, looking to Miss Crane nervously, not sure if she should have raised her hand first.

Chief Thunderbolt looked at Kid Wikked. "No, he means in your language, in Cree," Kid Wikked spoke up.

"They say, '*Whachay, dannee dotamin,*'" Miss Crane answered, smiling at Chief Thunderbolt. "It means 'Hello, how are you?'"

"I am fine. And you?" the chief answered to Miss Crane. They both giggled.

"So what questions do you little redskins have for us today?" Kid Wikked asked, slapping his hands together and looking at the class. The children stared back at him.

"What band are you?" Gerald finally blurted, looking at Chief Thunderbolt.

"I prefer to think of myself as belonging to all tribes," Chief Thunderbolt answered.

"How do you say hello in your language?" Sal Enosse asked.

"Well, today I say, '*Dam doman,*' but normally I would say '*Hola, como está?*'" The children smiled at the strange words.

"Can you kick Kid Wikked's bum?" Thomas asked.

"Thomas!" Miss Crane blurted, her face turning red.

"It's OK," Chief Thunderbolt said, raising his giant hand. "Actually, Kid Wikked and me, we're partners. We represent what is good and honourable in our society." He lifted his arms in a big circle for the children. "We are the alliance of the old

ways and new, of cultures, of what made this country what it is today."

The children stared at him some more. Noah didn't know what to think. The words sounded big and good, but he really couldn't figure out what they meant. Kid Wikked kind of looked left out to Noah.

"Are you an honorary member of the Spics?" Noah asked Kid Wikked.

"Noah!" Miss Crane squealed.

The two big wrestlers looked confused, like they'd been given back-to-back Atomic Drops.

"I think that's quite enough," Miss Crane announced sternly to the class. "Please accept my apologies, Chief, Mr. Wikked. The children don't get many visitors."

"That's quite all right," Chief Thunderbolt answered, touching her shoulder, making her blush. Noah wished he knew what he'd said wrong.

"Make sure you eat all your vegetables," Kid Wikked growled to the kids, bending and making a crab with his arms so his huge muscles bulged from his T-shirt.

"And make sure to say your prayers to the Great Spirit," Chief Thunderbolt bellowed, lifting his arms and making the muscles bounce like softballs under the skin.

Noah spent all of Wednesday trying to figure out how to get out of church. He could pretend to be sick. No, that was no good. His mother would stay back with him. He could pretend to have a big homework assignment and maybe his parents would let him stay home alone to complete it. That wouldn't work either. They'd ask all kinds of questions he couldn't answer. There was only one option.

As soon as they walked to their pew Wednesday night, Noah pulled his mom's arm and whispered, "Gotta pee." He walked slowly down the centre aisle, and when he reached the door, he bolted out and down the road to the community centre. His parents would be so caught up in their hallelujahs and tongue-talking that they wouldn't even notice him gone.

Inside the community centre, all the seats were taken except for the first three rows around the ring. The first match was already going. Noah made his way to the very front row, his eyes glued to a tag-team match between the Orderlies and De Stubborn Headache and Giant Haystacks. The Orderlies were far outweighed, but Noah saw right away that they were much more agile, one of them jumping away to avoid Giant Haystacks' clumsy swings and bouncing off the ropes, slingshotting himself into Haystacks' soft mountain of a belly. When Haystacks could take no more punishment, he made the reach to a frantic Headache. The two men touched fingers and Headache was in the ring. The ref was trying to be a good one, Noah saw, but the Orderlies were so identical that he couldn't keep them straight. When it seemed that one Orderly was out of gas, the other would trick the ref into looking elsewhere while they quickly switched places. The crowd whispered their praise of the Orderlies' cunning, and agreed that it was just a matter of time until they had Giant Haystacks and De Stubborn Headache gasping for breath. In a daring two-man ricochet, one Orderly flung the other with such force that Noah winced at the slap of muscle on muscle as the Orderly careened into Headache, knocking him out. The ref gave the three count and the crowd clapped a little.

Noah whooped when Kid Wikked took his corner to face Beef Wellington. Miss Crane and Miss Reynolds and Miss

Nelson had come up to the front row now and were cheering for the two men. The fight seemed to last forever. Both men growled and fell and hollered and, just when it seemed that one had the other in an impossible situation, he would break free. Suddenly, Diesel Machine appeared at ringside, making threatening gestures towards Kid Wikked. At one point he reached under the rope when the ref wasn't looking and tripped the Kid up. Beef Wellington pounced.

That's when Noah saw Chief Thunderbolt dash down the aisle, diving and sliding into the ring to come to Kid Wikked's aid. The ref tried to pull the three men apart and, when he threatened to disqualify Kid Wikked, Chief Thunderbolt stood up and argued loudly with him in the corner. Noah watched in horror as Diesel grabbed a folding chair behind the ref's back and climbed into the ring. Beef Wellington held a dazed Kid Wikked. Diesel Machine raised the chair and brought it down with a metallic bong onto the Kid's back, then threw it out of the ring and dove out. It all happened so quickly. By the time the ref turned from arguing with the Chief, Beef Wellington lay with Kid Wikked unconscious beneath him. The ref jumped to the floor and slapped out a three count. Noah wanted to shout to him that the bad men had cheated, but couldn't find the words. Kid Wikked opened his eyes for a second and stared straight at Noah. Noah waved, but the Kid closed his eyes quickly and went back to sleep.

"Stupid ref," Noah whispered under his breath. He watched the Chief help a woozy Kid out of the ring. Noah gave the Chief a thumbs-up, and the Chief gave him one back with sad eyes. It was clear now. The Chief and Kid were better than good guys. Beef and Diesel had chosen the dark side.

When the hall had cleared, Noah again went to the

change room. The men who had battled were sitting tired with towels over their shoulders. Noah was surprised to see that all these enemies sat and laughed with one another. It was good that they didn't hold grudges. He walked in proudly and made the biggest muscle he could with each arm. The men ignored him.

"I want to join you," Noah said quietly. The men laughed at him.

"You ain't old enough, kid," Kid Wikked finally said. "It's a shitty life anyway. You don't want this."

I do, Noah wanted to say. The men went back to talking with each other. Noah walked out and down the road to face his parents.

Noah's face still stung from where his father had slapped him. Hitting Noah was something his father had learned when he became a Pentecostal, Noah figured out. He walked along the river and turned this over in his head. It was Thursday morning, and Noah figured that if he walked fast, he could make the highway in a few days. The morning was warm and bright. His friends would just be getting to school. Noah's parents wouldn't even notice him missing until dinnertime, when he didn't turn up. He would show all of them — his parents, his friends, the wrestlers. He'd make his way to some big city where they were sure to have a wrestling school. Noah would work hard, grow strong and become great.

Last night his father had said, "No more wrestling for you," and by the time he finished that sentence Noah'd made his decision to run away. He'd filled his knapsack with crackers and pork and beans and a can opener this morning without his mother seeing. Those wrestlers would be sorry they hadn't

taken Noah, especially on that day in the future when he held up the championship belt. Noah walked along the frozen river and formed and re-formed his plans.

By lunchtime, Noah's pack felt heavy. He sat by the river, on a large flat boulder that was warmed by the sun. He opened a can of pork and beans and realized he'd forgotten to pack a spoon. He scooped the beans out with his fingers and looked at the ice and water. The first clouds of doubt skittered across the horizon. The nights were still cold and they were very dark. Noah lay on the rock and let its warmth sink into his skin.

He wasn't sure how long he'd slept. Something tickling his face woke him. He opened his eyes to a great swarm of butterflies above and around him. Many had landed on the rock and on his body, their wings beating slowly. The ones that still hovered were so great in number that their wings made a low whirring sound. Noah's heart quickened at the sight. Some of the butterflies were as big as his hand. Their colours were amazing in the sunlight, orange and glistening black and deep red. Their wings made such a sound that it seemed to Noah that they were whispering to him in some strange language. He watched and listened to these tiny tongues of fire. Hundreds of butterflies. Thousands. They continued their whispering until Noah began to make out a pattern, began to understand them, began to grasp the meaning of this event.

It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. Slowly the butterflies dispersed until Noah was left alone again. He thought of Grandfather. Grandfather called these little creatures by their Western Cree name. *Kumamuk*. Grandfather admired them for their beauty and grace, for the strength that enabled them to fly thousands of kilometres. Noah knew now what he had to do. He'd experienced his vision.

He made it back to the reserve before dinner. No one seemed to know he'd been gone all day. Miss Crane wasn't her usual self with Chief Thunderbolt around, and she'd not even reported Noah's absence to the principal. His butterflies were already protecting him. That night he began his preparation for Friday evening and the last match. He raided his mother's old box of powwow materials which she hadn't touched since becoming a Pentecostal. He also swiped two of her old pairs of pantyhose. If he worked hard, he'd have it complete in time.

Grandfather came for dinner that night. Noah wanted to tell him about the butterflies, but knew that would have to wait. Tonight's match was on his mind, and Noah was ready to sneak out and get in trouble later if he had to in order to see it.

"I got some plans with Noah tonight," Grandfather said to Noah's parents. They looked mad that Grandfather wanted to take him and do something. He was supposed to be grounded.

"All right," Noah's father said, then got up and helped Noah's mom with the dishes. Grandfather leaned close to Noah and whispered that he'd better get ready for the wrestling match or he'd be late. Noah ran to his room and changed. Even though it wasn't cold out, he pulled his coat on. He met Grandfather outside.

"Me, I'm too old for the crowds," Grandfather said. "Get going."

Noah ran into Thomas and Gerald at the hall. "Ever dumb you," Gerald said. "You're going to melt in your coat."

"Are you going up front?" Thomas asked.

"Yeah. You come too," Noah said. "You don't want to miss this tonight." The boys followed him to the nearly empty front row. The card tonight was excellent. Bulba was fighting De

Stubborn Headache to get things rolling. Then there was a rematch between Pink Panther and Fritz Von Schnitzel. But the highlight was the final bout. Diesel Machine, in what the announcer called an unholy alliance with Beef Wellington, was scheduled to battle Kid Wikked and Chief Thunderbolt. Noah fingered part of the creation he'd carefully placed in his coat pocket.

He had a hard time concentrating on the first match. De Stubborn Headache attempted to lift Bulba off the ground but collapsed under his immense weight. Bulba lucked out and got an easy three count. Noah looked around him. The crowd had become braver. Kids and adults alike had filled up the third and second rows, and even part of the first. They'd also started making a little noise, but not much. Pink Panther laid out Fritz Von Schnitzel with rapid machine-gun punches, then climbed to the top turnbuckle and flew off, landing with a slap on the convulsing Schnitzel. Victory once again was the Panther's, and Noah was happy to see the good side winning.

Noah watched his hero climb into the ring alongside Kid Wikked. They faced off with Beef and Diesel. Noah's heart pounded. The bad guys dominated the first part of the match. Every time the ref wasn't paying attention, one of the bad men did something dirty. One time it was an eye gouge, another time a kick below the belt. But then Kid Wikked came back from a near tap-out, picking Beef high up into the air, then dropping him straight onto his own back, slamming Beef onto the canvas with a great boom. The crowd actually shouted out at that one.

The Kid tenderized Beef with foot stomps to the stomach, then tagged Chief Thunderbolt. Noah had never seen such a sight as Chief Thunderbolt dashing into the ring, landing

furious blows and tossing Wellington around like a doll. It was obvious that Beef was cooked. He had nothing left. But in the bad guy's corner, with the Chief's back to Diesel Machine, Diesel crashed his forearm onto the back of Chief's neck, a totally illegal move. Chief Thunderbolt dropped stunned to his knees, and Beef tagged out to Diesel. Diesel entered the ring and paced around Chief Thunderbolt like a lion, making faces at a frantic Kid Wikked. Then he began kicking Chief with loud stomps. The Chief fell onto his back, hurt bad. Noah's heart pounded. He could hear the butterflies in his ears. Diesel knelt on Chief's chest, his back to Noah, and raised his arms to the crowd.

This was Noah's chance. He pulled the stocking he'd carefully painted in the bright colours of the butterfly from his coat pocket and pulled it over his head, adjusting it so he could see through the little holes he'd cut for his eyes. He tore off his coat and kicked off his jeans to reveal the costume he'd created, ran from his seat and pulled himself onto the side of the ring. He quickly scrambled up the ropes and balanced himself on the top turnbuckle, lifting his arms wide to reveal the cape he'd painted orange and red and green, the wings of the butterfly. His wings. "I'm doing it" was all he could think. His ears were filled with the roar and rush of his blood, with the butterflies whispering to him, "You're doing it!" Beneath his cape Noah wore another pair of his mother's pantyhose, these ones black like a butterfly's body, and pulled up to his chest.

For the first time he could hear the crowd. He could make out Thomas' and Gerald's voices in the shouting. Some of the women screamed. Others were laughing with excitement. Noah looked across the ring at the awestruck face of Kid

Wikked. He raised his arms higher for the crowd to drink in his costume and shouted, "I am Butterfly Warrior!"

With his back still to Noah, Diesel Machine was completely unaware of his presence. Noah looked down at Chief Thunderbolt. The Chief looked surprised. He slowly, haltingly raised his arm from the mat and gave Noah a thumbs-up. Noah tensed, then leapt. It felt like he was in the air for ever. The orange and red and green cape made of his father's old dress shirt flapped behind him. He had just enough time to watch Diesel's head turn up to him. Diesel barely had time to shout, "Whoa!" before Noah landed on him, Noah's knee sharply striking Diesel's forehead and sending him off Chief Thunderbolt.

Noah landed with a whomp on the mat, and it was much harder and hurt much more than he had imagined. The crowd roared now. He rolled over, the wind knocked out of him, and stared at the lights above him. His knee ached bad, but his friends shouting his name excitedly helped ease the pain a little. Noah sat up just in time to watch Chief Thunderbolt put Diesel Machine in the Strong Bow before pinning him. An egg had risen already on Diesel's forehead and his eyes were closed. Noah raised his arms up in victory. They had won. The Indians had won.