

# THE BIGGEST MOCCASINS IN THE WORLD

Short Story



Written by Richard Van Camp

Illustrated by Moses (Amik) Beaver

Richard Van Camp is a Dogrib (Tlicho) Dene from Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. He is an internationally known storyteller and best-selling author of adult and children's fiction. Richard was awarded Storyteller of the Year for both Canada and the United States by the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers in 2007.

## Tips

**italics:** words from other languages are set in italics; for example, *pardonnez-moi* and *mahsi cho*.

**Dogrib:** First Nations peoples who live in the Great Slave Lake area of the Northwest Territories

**Nagha (Sasquatch):** a very large, hairy, humanlike creature said to live in remote wilderness areas of Canada and the United States

**Old Man's Beard:** a type of fungus with a hair-like appearance that grows on branches

**mahsi cho:** thank you very much [in the Dogrib language]

## Before

Do you know someone who tells good stories? What do you like about this person's storytelling? What makes a good story?

## During

As you read this short story, think about what the author means when he says, "This is a story of respect from my family to you."

This is a story of respect from my family to you.

A long time ago when my mother, Rosa, was a little girl, she and her brothers and parents went hunting for caribou way up high on the barren lands. My grandpa, Pierre Washie, was a great hunter. He and other Dogrib men led many community hunts for years and always hunted to provide for people who couldn't hunt for themselves. My grandma, Melanie, was a superb cook. One of the many secrets to the success of her dry meat was that she bathed her caribou meat with the sweet smoke from diamond willows, seasoning it to make it the very best for her family and community.

My grandma was also an incredible moccasin maker. It's rumoured that the Queen herself buys my grandma's moccasins for all her buddies every Christmas. On New



Year's, they jig together to Métis fiddle music! The Queen is rumoured to be almost as good a jigger as my grandpa. Yes! The Queen and her pals get together and whoop it up all night long, just jiggling away, boy, and dosey-do'ing—

*(Ahem ahem ahem ... pardonnez moi!)*

Well, back on the barren lands, as my mom, her two brothers, and my grandma and grandpa were sleeping, their dogs started to growl. Then they started to howl. Then they started to scream! It was scary to hear dogs screaming at something no one could see. So, without thinking, my uncle Eddie ran out of the tent to find out what was happening.

Well, he dabbed his nose into the cold nose of a Sasquatch! (In Dogrib, we call the Sasquatch the *Nagha* or Bushman.) Can you imagine who was more scared—my uncle or the *Nagha*?



My uncle said they were both scared. Touching noses, they yelled at each other as loud as they could. While everyone was screaming (even the dogs!), my grandpa fired his rifle into the air to scare away whatever it was that was causing all this excitement. Before the *Nagha* turned and ran, he tried to grab some of my grandma's famous



dry meat from the smoke stand. But my grandpa was such a good carpenter that the *Nagha* couldn't knock the stand over, so he didn't get any dry meat at all.

It was then that my uncle Eddie got a good look at the *Nagha*. He stood and moved like a strong man, my uncle Eddie said, and he was huge, with long arms and powerful legs. He was covered in long hair, almost like Old Man's Beard, but softer. He had the face of a little boy but his eyes were big, like a moose. The *Nagha's* hands were huge, like the hands of a man who has worked hard his whole life. His smell was strong, like burnt hair, making everyone's eyes water. (Can you believe my mom slept through all this?)

Well, my family got up and saw the tracks the *Nagha* had left. My uncle Eddie said the tracks were so huge that he could place a full litter of six baby huskies inside the track and they could all stretch out and wiggle their little toes as they yawned.

My grandma and grandpa started to break camp.

"How cheap! Why do we have to move?" Uncle Eddie asked. Now that the *Nagha* was gone, he was getting cheeky.

"All animals have trails," my grandpa explained. "We set up camp late and missed the signs that we were on the *Nagha's* trail. The *Nagha* are shy people. He would not have bothered us if we hadn't set up camp in his territory."

My grandma took apart four pairs of moccasins that no one was using. She made one big pair for the footsteps the stranger had left behind.

"What are you doing?" Uncle Eddie asked.

"Making a gift for a new friend," she answered.

When my family moved camp, they left behind the dry meat the *Nagha* had tried to gather and a huge pair of moccasins as a way of saying they were sorry for trespassing on his territory.

My uncle Eddie said that a week later, when they were on their way home, they passed by the same spot and the dogs started to whimper. Uncle Eddie could see the fresh tracks of the *Nagha*. The dry meat they left behind was gone and so was the huge pair of my grandma's moccasins. The tracks leading up to the smoke stand were





from bare feet, while the trail leading away was made with the biggest moccasined feet anyone had ever seen.

Can you believe that? My uncle Eddie told me that story one day in Fort Rae. He was getting ready to go fight fires and we were having tea.

“Yup,” he said, “your grandma should be in the *Guinness World Records* for making the biggest pair of moccasins in human and *Nagha* history. And I should be in there too, for being the first Dogrib Indian to ever touch noses with a Sasquatch!”

Is this cool, or what? This is a true story! *Mahsi cho!*

## What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

“This story is all true. I’ve been known to fib gently, but this is all true. I’m not being cheap and I’m not sprucing it up. Really. Not even a little. *Mahsi cho*. Thank you very much. *A ho!*”

### After

- 1. Reading for Meaning** What have you learned about the Dogrib culture by reading this story? Give details from the story to support this learning.
- 2. Reading for Meaning** Why did the family decide to move their camp? Choose the best answer from the choices below.
  - A. They didn’t want to get attacked by the *Nagha*.
  - B. They set up camp too late at night and didn’t realize that the land was inhospitable.
  - C. They needed to find a better area for hunting.
  - D. They wanted to respect the *Nagha* by not camping in his territory.
- 3. Reading for Meaning** In the story, the grandmother gives the gift of the moccasins to the *Nagha* as a sign of respect. What are other instances of respect in the story?
- 4. Student Voice** Do you believe that the events in the story are possible? Why or why not?
- 5. Critical Literacy** What are the key themes in this story? Are these themes demonstrated in your own family? Explain.
- 6. Metacognition** Reread the first sentence in the story and think about why the author wrote the story. How does knowing the author’s purpose for writing a story enhance your understanding of it?

### Beyond

**Critical Literacy** “The Biggest Moccasins in the World” is told from the author’s recollections of stories told to him by his uncle. Write or tell your own version of this story from the perspective of the *Nagha*. How does your version differ?