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Don't Open the Door: The Windigo as Metaphor in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

My heart pounds in my chest; I look around and all I can see is darkness. There is the sound of slow and heavy steps that circle behind me, and it makes me shiver in fear. A house begins to take shape in the darkness before me and I recognize it. I'd recognize it anywhere. The sound of movement scraped closer to me. I launch myself towards the front door and the safety it implies. Once inside, I slam the door closed and rest against it as I try to slow the pounding in my chest. I know this place, but something doesn't feel right. It is too silent and still.

Automatically I turn and slide the large silver knife into the door jamb, grateful my Grandmama thought it was more secure than a dead bolt.

Four strides and I've crossed the tiny living room to enter the kitchen, and it's just like the last time I saw it, shiny bright yellow mustard walls with ketchup-coloured trim. The room is a tiny box dominated by a table with six chairs, and a matching seventies green fridge and oven. There are no cupboards, no counters, no sink because the house isn't big enough for those to be in the same room. The window looks out into the laundry room, and there is a blackness that permeates it from the outside. I frown; the darkness seems off somehow but before I can chase the reason why I see an image of a tiny, elderly woman appear in the glass.

"Aunty!" She is small and seems frail, but she's all sinew and strength inside, a fact that's proven when I throw my arms around her.

"Niece," she says as she pulls back to look me over; her gaze has that same penetrating quality it always had, and it still leaves me feeling open and vulnerable. "It's been a while since you've been by," she said. I flush and look down as I tried not to squirm despite the fact there was no censure in her voice. I see a book in my hands, and I suddenly remember why I wanted to talk to her before my next English class, and the troubling issues that have been brought up that are layered within the narrative. However, I can't shake the feeling that I it shouldn't have possible to see her before that class was going to happen.

"Aunty! I was hoping to talk to you about my class," I said. She gestured for me to take a seat and took the head of the table pulling out a pack of smokes. She quelled the comment that I was about to make with a raise of her eyebrow. I press my lips together and choke back the words, as well as the concern about the tobacco because she is old enough to make her own choice on this matter.

My hands fiddle with the book where it sits in front of me on the table, the multicoloured flags sticking out of the book like tongues out of a mouth. My face flushes as I remember the incredulous looks and comments of my classmates. When I raise my eyes to Aunty, it's as if she can see the damage visible on my skin. I pull down my sleeves like it could defend against her gaze, as if it could hide the truth from her eyes.

She ignores the movement, her eyes focused intently on my eyes. "Honey, I can barely read. You know me and your Grandmama were smuggled to the States after the incident with our brother in that school on Kuper Island," she said; her voice is flat like it is every time Kuper Island Residential School comes up.

I swallow hard and try to maintain her gaze. I said, "You were the one who has told us that knowledge isn't finite, or limited by the acquisition of degrees."

She snorts at me and shakes her head. I look back at the book and bite my lip. The smell of sulphur hits my nose, which confuses me until the sound of a match being struck catches up to me. She breathes deep on the cigarette, the acrid stench of burning chemicals is both familiar and painful.

"So," I start, "we're supposed to talk the book *Three Day Road*. I want to talk about windigo, and how the author used its lore to tell his story." I flip the pages across my thumb and clear my throat.

Aunty remained silent and the darkness of the laundry room slinks its way towards the edges of the window.

"So, the windigo folk lore is used mainly as a metaphorical tool?" I look up to gauge her reaction and she quirks her eyebrow in response.

She says nothing as she flicks off the ashes from the tip of her cigarette, her gaze unwavering.

"Right, so the windigo, the folk lore of the cannibalistic monster of the Northern Algonquian First Nation's group...or groups I guess," I said. "Well, I think it's used as a metaphor. For the morphine the characters become addicted to, but most importantly for the war, you know World War I?"

She snorts indelicately, and I quirk my own eyebrow back at her; she said, "Yes dear, I am familiar with that war. Please continue."

I cringe as a spectre of Uncle flickers in behind her and then back to shadows from where he came. "Right of course," I said. How could I forget?

"Well David Gilmore, in his book *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and all Manner of Imaginary Terrors*," I said, "describes windigo as 'gigantic, ancient, mute,

unstoppable, ancestral to man, ferocious, supra-human in the sense of being simultaneously godlike and demonic, a repository of all our worst fears, an incarnation of pure malevolence as conceived by the human mind ... Windigo drips with blood and gore' (90). *Wikipedia* adds that 'it would grow in proportion to the meal it had just eaten, so that it could never be full ... simultaneously gluttonous and emaciated from starvation' (Windigo).

"Monster from the abyss of the mind," I said. "Or hell."

"Is that all they are?" Aunty asked.

"Well," I said, "in the book Boyden suggests 'that sadness was at the heart of the windigo, a sadness so pure that it shrivelled the human heart and let something else grow in its place' (261)." Something tightens in my chest and I send out a prayer so that I may never know that kind of pain.

"So, windigo as addiction to morphine," I said. "In the book the character Niska notices her nephew Xavier and says, 'he thinks that I don't see him putting those needles in his arm' and that 'something far worse is consuming him from the inside' (34). Throughout the entire book morphine is described in this way. Addiction can eat at you; it's all consuming and never satisfied. It's just like the windigo, the more he eats the hungrier he becomes," I said, my words tumbling together.

"Keep going," she said patiently. The smoke from her cigarette thickens the air between us.

"He thinks about his friend Elijah and how '[w]e will fight together again, fight against this medicine that consumes us' (269)," I said. "When Xavier runs out of the drug he says '[j]ust one more needle. I wish I had one more needle (344).' That repetition of 'just one more' under

scores that compulsion, as if that one last hit would somehow ease the hunger he has, and then he'd need no more."

"Is it just you that thinks this?" Aunty asked. She seems relaxed but her eyes are sharp and focused as she steadily draws smoke in and out of her lungs.

I hesitate because something about her question seems off, but unable to figure it out I continued, "Sophie McCall says that '[w]ith one leg painfully amputated, he, like Elijah, develops an addiction to morphine, surrendering to a windigo-like cycle of craving and deprivation, consumption and starvation' (74)."

She nods and stubs out the cigarette. "Tell me about the war," she said as she glanced into the laundry room. I flick my eyes to see what caught her attention, and there is only the suggestion of movement within the shadows.

I blink and focus on my Aunty. "Right, so the war is the biggest metaphor for a windigo," I said. I catch a movement out of the corner of my eye, but there is nothing to see when I search it out.

"Keep talking. We got as long as you need, but I know how you get about your stories," she said when I hesitated for too long.

"Ok well, like Vikki Visvis says, 'rather than conceptualizing the European war effort as a general phenomenon, the novel figuratively depicts it as an implacable and ravenous windigo that consumes the lives of soldiers and civilians' (para. 8)," I said. "I think that she's right. Last time I talked to my brother we spent a solid hour and a half talking about this book and the war," I responded.

She smiles sharp and quick. "Must of made his day you passionately talking about history and literature with him," she said. I smirk as I remember how I tried to keep up my note-taking while he talked.

"Yeah, he was excited that I was wanting to write about the war...and the windigo," I said. "The war itself is a windigo because it is consuming and never satisfied," I said. "Like it says, '[i]t's as if the war has moved to another place. It has sucked the life from Saint-Eloi and left it like this, has moved on in search of more bodies to try and fill its impossible hunger.' (73)." I pause to close my eyes, when I think of the casualties it's like the dead are pushing on a tensile wall, always on the verge of breaking through.

I shake my head and continue, "I looked up the damage to human life on *Wikipedia*, and it puts the death toll at over at over 16 million, and another 20 million injured for that war ("World War I casualties"). Who knows the extent of the psychological damage."

Aunty is very still at the mention of psychological damage, and the brightness of her being dimmed as her gaze turns far away, as if she was remembering something. As if she saw another world. She burns almost half her cigarette on her next inhale, and it makes the room hazier. I wonder at her reaction, and if she knows where I am going to next.

"I don't think that the war was just a singular windigo because another part of the of the myth is that human beings could turn into '[w]endigos if they ever resorted to cannibalism, or...become possessed by the demonic spirit of a Wendigo' (Human Windigo)," I said.

"But war is madness, and demonic in nature. It can turn men and women into monsters—into windigo. I think Elijah is the epitome of the madness of war. He becomes consumed by morphine, and consumed by madness," I said. Aunty draws on her smoke. She must be consuming them faster than I thought since the room keeps getting fuzzier.

"Now I don't think we can blame his love for killing solely on the drugs and war because, let's face it, he had to go to residential school where he was sexually assaulted. Repeatedly," I add after a few beats of silence. I keep my eyes on the window to the laundry room, which so dark now that I can't see the far wall, and I wonder if this is the darkness of night I am seeing. I can't seem to gauge time, which is worrisome so I count my breaths to keep them even and to stay focused on my goal. "Like when Xavier and Elijah make their way to the town to enlist, and they come across the forest fire? Xavier says that '[t]he danger of the fire so close seems to do something to Elijah that I am not sure I like' (52). It's like the destruction excited him more than the danger scared him," I said. "That kind of fascination, or compulsion, with something that only consumes and destroys? It foreshadows his character," I said as I glance at Aunty's face. She seems focused on me again.

"Right, so I think Elijah turns windigo. His transformation is kinda small to begin with," I said. "You can see the his love for the kill when Thompson asks Elijah about throwing the Mills bombs into the crater with the German soldiers, and he responds with 'It's in my blood' (75). Xavier is still grappling with the kill at this point, and the first human lives he has taken, but Elijah passes it off as nothing. Now that could be because he wants to fit in since of the race differences in the squadron, but with the direction his character heads I think he means it."

Aunty breathes out smoke and I take a deep breath of the tendrils that snake their way across the table. I have never really wanted to smoke myself because of how dangerous it is, but I find the scent relaxing and comforting since Grandmama, Aunties and Uncles all smoked when I was younger. The tip of the cigarette seems brighter with every breath as if darkness has stolen into the room.

I tell Aunty about the evolution of Elijah, and how he stops eating. I tell her that "Elijah tells Xavier that before he'd leave each corpse he stares into their eyes and that a 'strange spark of warmth [would] accumulate deep in his gut each time he does it...he says the spark fills his belly when it gnaws for food' (200)." I swallow hard and continue, "Xavier says, 'I see a hunger in Elijah that he can't satisfy' (326)."

My fingers twitch as if they can find a purchase that will stop the drag into the abyss that Elijah pulls the reader into. A place of madness and death, of things that I could never imagine and now can never forget. One of the reasons I am here with Aunty is to be grounded in the safety of my family because there is no safer place in any world for protection no matter what the danger.

I tell my Aunty about the war crimes that Elijah has committed. "On page 210 there is the scene that depicts Elijah as he takes a man's scalp and saves it in his kit bag. Then on page 310 Elijah gives Xavier some meat, and as he chews on it Elijah claims that the meat is from a German soldier. As Xavier retches trying to empty his stomach as Elijah tells him it's a joke. That it's only horse meat, but was it? I wonder if Elijah had been feeling alone, and that he wanted another to join him in his madness."

Aunty exhales more smoke and asks, "Will we ever know? Would we want to know? Some things are best left unexplored. Look too closely and you may find yourself lost to madness as well." I recoil from that thought and look towards the door I came in. The silver of the knife flickers where it bars the door from those who may try to enter.

"There are a number of incidents in the evolution of Elijah's madness, more than I could realistically tell you," I said. "Some of the things I read were disturbing, like Elijah setting snare traps in German occupied trenches to kill men (270). Or when he killed a child Xavier was trying

to calm down (306). He even brought the shoulder blade of a German soldier for Xavier to divine the location of the enemy (319). He killed a fellow soldier by overdosing him with morphine (337), and then he kills Breech and Grey Eyes to bury the accusation of him defiling corpses and committing war crimes (340)."

"From what you tell me it sounds like he may have been turning windigo," Aunty said.

"Was he the only one?"

I answer, "There is a group of men that that Elijah and Xavier meet in a tavern, and one of the men acts out a scene where he scalps a man and Xavier says, 'I can tell he has done that very thing many times before' (202). Later that evening Elijah is sitting and speaking with one of the Frenchmen who tells him that he should. '[t]ake the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you' (204). He then describes the soldiers in his squadron as windigo because of the way they behave as they get ready to go on a raid. He says that his fellow soldiers 'they remind him of the Frenchmen' (207)."

Aunty nods at my theory even though she is harder to see now with her cigarette smoke filling the room. "You didn't come here to teach me about metaphors and the theories of your professors..." she said as she pulls another drag of smoke into her body. I blink and try to distract myself from her look, the window into the laundry room has lost all reflection. Silence thickens the air, broken by the rhythmic draw of her breath.

I look back at Aunty and through the haze, and through the table a door has appeared in the space between us, and from my perspective it looks like it is open just a crack. Aunty doesn't mention the apparition before her. Perhaps she can't see it.

"Well it's just in all the articles and books I have read all of the information is centred on metaphor, where the windigo is used as an instrument to describe a cultural psychosis, or trauma,

or natural weather phenomena. Not one article ever made mention that possibility of windigo is real, but maybe it's because academia is determined to remain with the 'truth,'" I said.

"Do you think there is one 'truth,' niece?" Aunty asked me. "That science and facts can explain all there is. All there is not?"

"No. The truth we know from science changes as our knowledge of the universe expands. And because you always told us not to open the door without being prepared for the consequences, Aunty. You said there were things that we could not begin to comprehend in this world," I said. The shadow of the open doorway deepens as I speak.

"Good and bad go together niece," she said. "I don't have to be the one to tell you that. Even your Grandmama's church teaches that lesson. You can't learn about God without learning about the Devil, and you can't learn about the light without the dark. I also *know* you have been taught that where there is black 'n white, there is also grey."

The door to the house rattled suddenly, as if somebody has tried to open it from the outside, and there is the sound of something being raked across the roof. In the window a shade moves, a shadow deeper than blackness that surrounds it. My knuckles are white as I grip my book, and I try to keep my attention on Aunty, and maybe I can continue to pretend that things are normal.

"Think of the words you were told about the door, and *remember*. Close your eyes and see them in your mind, and hear them as if they are being spoken aloud to you now," Auntie said. I close my eyes and hear her slow drawn breath, the smell of burning tobacco curling between us reaching out as if to pull out the memory.

I open my eyes to a brightness that blinds me. My skin sticks to the black vinyl of the seat I am on, there is salt in the air, a purr of a car surrounds me, and I notice the road follows the

edge of the ocean. Someone speaks, and the timbre of the voice echoes as if more than one person. They say, "Aunty was always very clear—don't open the door without knowing the consequences because the bad always comes with the good." My mother glances at me through the rear-view mirror, and when our eyes connect I can see history stretched through the ages in her eyes and am pulled forward, all the way back to my Aunty.

The shadows of the house seem darker than before. Aunty said, "My darling Niece, I know you didn't come here to talk metaphor. I know why you are here." She focused her gaze on the open crack of the door between us. "Your Grandmama never talked about her gifts with you kids. Not that I blame her, she tried to ignore truth, and as punishment was compelled to live it."

"Aunty," I said as I shook my head in denial. "I... I... I know it's just metaphor," I said quietly with my eyes closed so I couldn't see. Aunty laughs but it doesn't sound like it's in good humour.

"Your Grandmama couldn't keep out truth, and neither can you," she said. "Maybe if the door had stayed closed," she said, "but you didn't heed the warning. I don't know if you would have been able to. You are the youngest daughter of youngest daughter—the gift would compel you seek truth out. Remember, remember that once that door is open, it cannot be closed. Just like how evil was unleashed into the world through story because 'once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world' (King 9)."

I furrow my brow and cover my ears to block out her words like I did as a child, but she was right. Truth finds its way in like smoke as it curls into the smallest of openings. The tapping sound on the window stays steady and strong, it matches the beat of my heart. The silver of the knife is bright and unyielding, and the only source of light now in the darkness that pervades the house.

Something slams against the front door and shakes the house, and I glance back at the door but the knife holds true. The slow drag of nails across of the roof now sounds like the trees as they are splintered in a storm. The window to the laundry room chips from the beat that taps against it. I glance at it and see hairline cracks spread from a sharp curved nail, and the suggestion of what appears to be a hand blocks the rest of the window. Aunty breathes her smoke out, her gaze sharp like the knife that bars the door.

I focus on the apparition, between me and my Aunty, and wonder where it goes... I wonder when I opened it. Out of the darkness in the shadow of the door comes the echo of words that have haunted my dreams, my nightmares, my life.

"Don't open the door."

"No," I choked. "I don't believe. It isn't *real* if I don't believe. Monsters are nothing but tools and metaphors used as cautionary tales."

"Child," she said. "They don't need you to believe in them in order to exist."

## Woks Cited

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