"Almost Soup" by Louise Erdrich

WINDIGO DOG

You will end up puppy soup if you're born a pure white dog on the reservation, unless you're one who is extra clever, like me. I survived into my old age through dog magic. That's right. You see me, you see the result of dog wit. Dog skill. Medicine ways I learned from my elders, and want to pass on now to my relatives. You. So listen up, animoshug. You're only going to get this knowledge from the real dog's mouth once.

There is a little of a coyote in me, just a touch here in my paws, bigger than a dog's paws. My jaw, too, strong to snap rabbit bones. Prairie-dog bones as well. Prairie. I don't mind saying to you that I'm not a full-blood Ojibwa reservation dog. I'm part Dakota, born out in Bwaanakeeng, transported here. I still remember all that sky, all that pure space, all that blowing dirt of land where I got my name, which has since become legendary.

Here's how it happened.

I was underneath the house one hot slow day panting in the dirt. I was a young thing. Just chubby, too, and like I said white all over. That worried my mother. Every morning she scratched dirt on me, threw me in the mud, rolled me in garbage to disguise my purity. Her words to me were this--My don, you won't survive if you lick you paws. Don't be respectable. Us Indian dogs have got to look as unappetizing as we can! Slink a little, won't you? Stick your ears out. Grow ticks. Fleas. Bite your fur here and there. Strive for a disreputable appearance, my boy. Above all, don't be clean!

Like I say, born pure white you usually don't stand a chance, but me, I took my mama's advice. After all, I was the son of a blend of dogs stretching back to the beginning of time on this continent. We sprang up here. We had no need to cross on any land bridge. We know who we are. Us, we are descended of Original Dog.

I think about her lots, and also about my ancestor, from way way back, the dog named Sorrow who drank a human's milk. I think about her because I know it was the first dog's mercy and the hand-me-down wit of the second that saved my life that time they were boiling the soup.

I hear these words--Get under the house, Melvin, fetch that white puppy now. Bam! My mama trows me in the farthest house corner and sits down on me. I cover up with her but once Melvin is in play distance I can't help it. I've got that curious streak of all the Indian dogs. I peek right around my mother's tail and whoops, he's got me. He drags me out and gives me to a grandma, who stuffs me in a gunnysack and slings me down beside the fire.

I fight the bag there for a while but it's warm and cozy and I go to sleep. I don't think much of it. Just another human habit I'll get used to, this stuffing dogs in sacks. Then I hear them talking.

Sharpen up the knife. Grandma's voice.

That's a nice fat white puppy. Someone else.

He'll make a good soup, but do you think enough to go around? Should we kill another one?

Then, right above me, they start arguing about whether or not I'll feed twenty. Me, just a little chunk of a guy, owah! No! I bark. No! No! I'm not enough for even five of your big strong warrior sons. Not me. What am I saying? I'm not enough for any of you! Anybody! No! I'm sour meat. I don't want to be eaten! In response, I get this tap from a grandma shoe, just a tap, but all us dogs know feet language. Be quiet or you'll get a solid one, it means. I shut up. Once I stop barking all I can do is think and I think fast. I think furious. I think desperate puppy thoughts until I know what I'll do the moment they let me out.

A puppy has just one weapon, and there really is no word for it but puppyness. Stuck in that bag, I muster all my puppyness. I call my tail wags and love licks up from deep way back, from the dogs going back to dogs unto the beginning of our association with these strange exasperating things called humans. I hear them stroking the steel on steel. I hear them tapping the boiling water pot. I hear them deciding I'll be enough, just barely. Then daylight. The bag loosens and a grandma draws me forth and just quick, because I'm smart, desperate, and connected with my ancestors, I look for the nearest girl child in the bunch around me. I spot her. I pick her out.

She's a visitor, sitting right there with a cousin, playing, not noting me at all. I give a friendly little whine, a yap, and then, as the grandma hauls me toward the table, a sharp loud bark of fear. That starts out of me. I can't help it. But good thing, because the girl hears it and responds.

"Grandma," she says, "what you going to do with the puppy?"

"Where'smyogleyzigzichaogleyzigzicha," mumbles Grandma, the way they do when trying to hide their actions.

"What?" That gets her little-girl curiosity up, a trait us dogs and children share in equal parts, what makes us love each other so.

"Don't you know, you dummy," shouts that boy cousin in boy knowledge, "Grandma's going to boil it up, make it into soup!"

"Aaay," my girl says, shy and laughing. "Grandma wouldn't do that." And she holds out her hands for me. Which is when I use my age old Original Dog puppyness. I throw puppy love right at her in loopy yo-yos, puppy drool, joy, and big-pawed puppy clabber, ear perks, eye contact, most of all the potent weapon of all puppies, the head cock and puppy grin."

"Gimme him, gimme!"

"Noooo," says Grandma, holding me tight and pursing her lips in that terrible way of grandmas, when they cannot be swayed. But she's dealing with her own descendant in its purest form--pure girl. Puppy-loving girl.

"Grandmagrandmagrandma!" she shrieks.

"Eeeeh!"

"GIMMEDAPUPPY!GIMMEDAPUPPY!"

Now it's time for me to wiggle, all over, to give the high-quotient adorability wiggle all puppies know. This is life or death. I do it double time, triple time, full of puppy determination, desperate to live.

"Ooooh," says another grandma, sharp-eyed, "quick, trow him in the pot!"

"Noooh," says yet another, "she wants that puppy bad, her."

"Give her that little dog," says a grandpa now, his grandpa heart swelling up. "She wants that dog. So give her that little dog."

My girl's doll-playing fingers are brushing my fur. She's ju7mpting for me. Spinning like a sweet maple seed. Straining up toward her grandma, who at this point can't hold on to me without looking almost supernaturally mean. And so it is, I feel those ancient dog-cooking fingers give me up before her disappointed voice does.

"Here."

And just like that I'm in the most heavenly of places. Soft, strong girl arms. I'm carried off to be petted and played with, fed scraps, dragged around in a baby carriage made of an old shoe box, dressed in the clothing of tiny brothers and sisters. Yes. I'll do anything. Anything. This is when my naming happens. As we go off I hear the grandpa calling from behind us in amusement, asking the name of the puppy. Me. And my calls back, without hesitation, the name I will bear from then on into my age, the name that has given so many of our breedless breed hope, the name that will live on in dogness down through the generations. You've heard it. You know it. Almost Soup.

Now, my brothers and sisters, shortly after I received my name I was transported up north to this reservation. Here on the ground where we now sprawl and scratch, I have lived out my years of strength, fertility, and purpose. As you see, I have survived into my tranquil old age. It is said of course by Ojibwas that those Indians who live on the plains eat dogs while they, the woods Indians, eat rabbits. However, it is my dog experience that this is not entirely true. I tell you now, relatives and friends, it is best to beware. Even in Ojibwa country, we are not out of danger.   
 There are, of course, the slick and deadly wheels of reservation cars. Poisons, occasionally, set out for our weaker cousins the mice and rats. Not to speak of the coyotes, the paw-snapping jaws of clever Ojibwa trapper steel. And we may happen into the snares set as well for our enemies. Lynx. Marten. Feral cats. Bears of course whom we worship. I learned early. Eat anything you can at any time. Fast. Bolt it down. Stay cute, but stay elusive. Don't let them think twice when they've got the hatchet out. I see cold steel, I'm gone. Believe it. And there are of course all sorts of illnesses we dread. Avoid the bite of the fox. It is madness. Avoid all bats. Avoid all black-and-white-striped- moving objects. And slow things with spiny quills. Avoid all humans when they get into a feasting mood. Get near the tables fast, though, once the food is cooked. Stay close to their feet. Stay ready.   
 But don't steal from their plates.  
 Avoid medicine men. Snakes. Boys with BB guns. Anything ropelike or easily used to hang or tie. Avoid outhouse holes. Cats that live indoors. Do not sleep under cars. Or with horses. Do not eat anything attached to a skinny, burning string. Do not eat lard from the table. Do not go into the house at all unless no one is watching. Do not, unless you are absolutely certain you can blame it on a cat, eat any of their chickens. Do not eat pies. Do not eat decks of cards, plastic jugs, dry beans, dish sponges. If you must eat a shoe, eat both of the pair, every scrap, untraceable. Sit quietly when they talk of powwows. Slink into the woods when they pack the vans. You could get left behind in *Bwaanakeeng*. Dog soup, remember? Dog muffins. Dog hot-dish. Don't even think of hitching along.  
 Always, when in doubt, the rule is you are better off underneath the steps. Don't chase cars driven by young teenage boys. Don't chase cars driven by old ladies. Don't bark or growl at men cradling rifles. Don't get wet in winter, and don't let yourself dry out when the hot winds of August blow. We're not equipped to sweat. Keep your mouth open. Visit the lake. Pee often. Take messages from tree stumps and the corners of buildings. Don't forget to leave in return a polite and respectful hello. You never know when it will come in handy, your contact, your friend. You never know whom you will need to rely upon.   
 Which is how I come to my next story of survival.   
 Within the deep lakes of the Ojibwa there is supposed to live a kind of man-monster-cat thing that tips boats over in the cold of spring and plucks down into his arms the sexiest women. Keeping this cranky old thing happy is the job of local Indian humans and they're always throwing their tobacco in the water, talking to the waves. But when the monster takes a person in whatever way -usually by drowning- there is some deeper, older, hungrier urge that must be satisfied by a stronger item than tobacco. You guessed it. Lay low, *animoshug*. I tell you, when a man goes out drunk in his motorboat, hide. Say he's just good-timing, lapping beer, driving his boat in circles, and hits his own wake coming at him. Pops out of the boat. Goes down.  
 Humans call that fate. We dogs call that stupidity. Whatever you name it, there's always a good chance they'll come looking for a dog. A white dog. One to tie with red ribbons. Brush nice. Truss in a rope. Feed a steak or two. Pray over. Pet soft. Not worth it. Stones around the neck. Then, splash! Dog offering!  
 My friends and relatives, we have walked down the prayer road clearing the way for humans since before time started. We have gone ahead of them to present their good points to the gatekeeper at that soft pasture where they eat all day and gamble the night away. Don't forget, though, in heaven we still just get the bones they toss. We have kept our humans company in darkest hours. Saved them from starvation -you know how. We have talked to their gods on their behalf and thrown ourselves in front of their wheels to save them from idiotic journeys, to the bootlegger's, say. We're glad to do these things. As an old race, we know our purpose. Original Dog walked alongside *Wenabojo*, their tricky creator. The dog is bound to the human. Raised alongside the human. With the human. Still, half the time we know better than the human.   
 We have lain next to our personal human shrouded in red calico. We have let our picked clean ceremonial dog bones be reverently buried in bark houses. We have warned off bad spirits from their babies, and talked to the irritating ghosts of their suicide uncles and aunts. We have always given of ourselves. We have always thought of humans first. And yet, for me, when Fatty Simon went down I did not hesitate. I took to the woods. I had puppies, after all, to provide for. I had a life. Next time, there was a guardrail accident way up on the bridge and Agnes Anderson met her end that way. Again, not me. Not me tied like a five-cent bundle and tossed overboard. Not when the lake took Alberta Meyer or the Speigelrein girls, not when old Kagewah fell through that spring sitting in his icehouse or even when our track star Morris Shawano disappeared and his dad's boat washed up to the north. Not me. Not Almost Soup. *Bungeenaboop*. In the Ojibwa language, that is my name and I refuse to give it up for human mistakes or human triumphs.  
 I refused, that is, until my girl weakened and got sick.  
 Cally was her name. The girl who saved my life. She loved me best of any other dog, put me up there with her human loves. As I told you she saved my life, but also saved me from worse -you know. (And now I specifically address my brothers, the snip-snip. The big C. the little n. The words we all know and watch for in their plans and conversations.) My little Cally hid me whenever her Mama tried to drag me to the vet. Thus, she saved my male doghood and allowed me full dogness. I have had, as a result of her courage, the honor of carrying our dogline down the generations. For this, alone, how could I ever thank her enough? And then she got sick, as I say.  
 One foul night in a blizzard far off in the bush, she got sick with a fever and a cough and it worsened, worsened, until the truth is, I sensed the presence of the black dog. We all know the great black dog. That is, death. He smells like iron cold. Sparks fly from his fur. He is the one who drags the creaking cart made of sticks. We have all heard the wheels groan as they turned, and hoped they kept on past our house. But on that cold late winter night, up north, he stopped. I heard his hound breath, felt the heat of his lungs of steam and fire.