

## Whistle for Protection

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(Based on story by Jeanne Pelletier and interview by Maria Campbell)

"Goodnight, Mom...Goodnight *Kokum*! Don't wait up!" I shouted as I raced out of my bedroom. Tonight was Arcand's barn dance and I didn't want to miss a thing.

"Mary! *Astum*!<sup>1</sup> Come here a minute." Mom called just as I was about to rush through the door. "Your ride isn't going to be here for another ten minutes so you can come say goodnight to your *Kokum* properly." I stopped in my steps and sighed deeply. I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling and counted to ten. Was my Mother ever my age? Didn't she know I just wanted to be with my friends? Slowly, I forced my feet to walk into the sitting room where *Kokum* and Mom sat by the fire talking and sipping cups of tea. "Don't you look lovely!" Mom exclaimed as she saw me and she quickly dabbed at her eyes. "Good grief!" I thought.

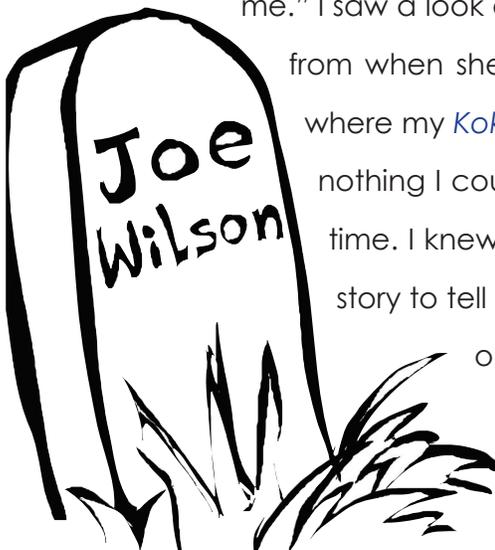
"Aw, come on, Mom. Don't get all worked up. It's only a jean skirt and a blouse." I hugged my Mom quickly hoping that, with a quick hug for her and *Kokum*, I'd be out the door in an instant. My *Kokum* got her arms around me and wouldn't let go. Before I knew it, she had my hand in her iron grip, and was tugging me into a sitting position next to her on the chesterfield. It's not that I don't love my Mom or *Kokum*, but how often does a girl get to go to a dance on her own? I forced myself to remain patient even though my brain was screaming "hurry up, already!"

"I want you to take this." *Kokum* instructed as she pressed a sharp object into my hand. "This saved me from a very bad experience when I was a young girl."

"*Kokum*," I said as I took the object, "Nothing is going to happen to me. And I don't need"—and before I could finish talking, I looked down at the small piece of steel in my hand—"a whistle to protect me." I saw a look of determination, and I knew she was going to tell me another story

from when she was a girl. Oh when would I learn to smile and say "thank you" where my *Kokum* was concerned? She still held my hand in her grip so there was nothing I could do but listen to her story and hope the dance wouldn't start on time. I knew my *Kokum*, it didn't matter if my ride was here or not, if she had a story to tell then by God I'd have to sit and hear the whole story. Why could no one understand what it was like to be fifteen years old?

"When I was your age," 'Oh no!' my brain shrieked as *Kokum* began her story "I was excited to go to dances too. I remember one dance that was held at the school. Joe Wilson had died three



months earlier, and it was the first celebration since his death. Some of the boys took a short cut through the cemetery on their way to the dance. They had no respect for the dead. As they passed through the graveyard, one of them hit old Joe's grave with his whip. He laughed and said, 'You come too, old man!'

The dance was well-attended and everyone was having a very good time. Just before midnight someone new arrived. The lunch was about to be served so no one noticed him right away. However, the stranger noticed the boys who had been in the cemetery earlier that evening. He walked right up to the boy that had whipped his grave, and he said, 'I came and I had a good time tonight. Now I want you to come to my place. You know, where you invited me from.' The man turned and left the party but the young man was scared, he was shaking so hard that his teeth were rattling. Some of the people said 'Isn't that Joe Wilson? He's dead!' They told the young man 'You'd better go to the priest, and tell him what you've done. The priest will know what to do.'



The next day, the boy went to the priest, and he told him all that he had done. The priest said, 'You have to go to the grave, and when you do, take a new baby with you. Go with the baby to the grave.' The boy was lucky. His sister had just given birth a few weeks before, and she allowed her brother to take the baby to the grave only after the priest assured her that the baby and her brother would be fine.

Saturday came and the boy took his sister's baby, and walked to the grave. There was old Joe Wilson standing there waiting. He saw the boy with the babe in his arms and he told the boy, 'You're lucky you brought this child, because if you didn't have this child, I'd do the same thing to you that you did to me.' Joe Wilson returned to his final resting place, and the boy left the cemetery. His sister immediately took her baby into her arms, and when she did, her brother fell over. He didn't die. He passed out he was so scared. Joe Wilson would've whipped him good if it had not been for the baby." *Kokum* looked at me, and I knew I was supposed to understand what she was trying to tell me but I didn't have a clue.

"*Kokum*, my friends wouldn't do that. I don't need a whistle for protection." I said.

"I'm not done yet." *Kokum* said as she tugged my hand firmly to shush me. Again I berated myself. I should have said, "Thanks for the whistle *Kokum*, I'll be sure to use it if I see any dead guys at the

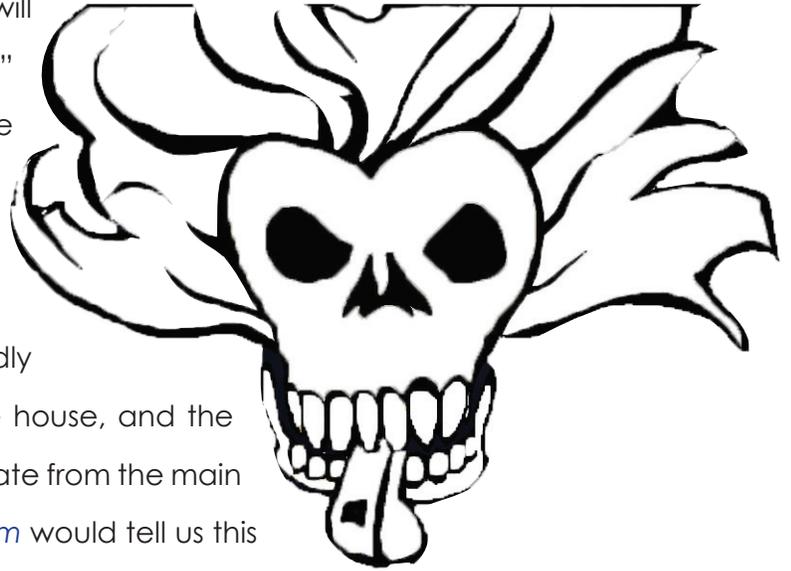
dance. Ohh! When will I learn?" I asked myself as *Kokum*'s voice loudly drowned out the sound of my own voice in my head.

"The whistle is not for you to use for protection from your friends. It is for you to use as protection against the *Whiitigo*," *Kokum* explained. *Whiitigo* was something *Kokum* hadn't mentioned before. If I had to carry a whistle, I figured I might as well find out what a *Whiitigo* was, and I'd humour my *Kokum* at the same time.

"What's a *Whiitigo*?" I asked. My *Kokum* squeezed my hand tightly for a moment. "Don't be patronizing, Mary," my mother scolded.

"I'm not!" I cried, "You've never mentioned a *Whiitigo* before *Kokum*. What is it?" *Kokum* looked at me and acted reluctant to tell the story. This is what she does. It's a part of *Kokum* being *Kokum*. "Please, tell me. I really do want to know."

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you. Only so it will keep you quiet, and I can have some peace." She shut her eyes, and I saw her paper thin eye lids flutter as she gathered her thoughts. "When I was a little girl my *Kokum* used to tell me this story. One winter she stayed with our family and every night we heard the train whistle blow loudly right at midnight. The adults would sleep in the house, and the older children slept in the summer kitchen, separate from the main house. Just before the whistle would blow, *Kokum* would tell us this story.



One calm, moonlit-night, much like tonight, my *Kokum* told us about *Whiitigos*, cannibal spirits. When a *Whiitigo*'s hungry he makes a loud screechy whistle, much like what you hear from a train or the whistle you hold in your hand. That sound means the *Whiitigos* are out, and they are hunting. Their hunger can only be satisfied by human flesh. Nothing else will do. If a *Whiitigo* touches you, it will eat you. If it eats you, then you will become a *Whiitigo* too. That's why I gave you this whistle. If you are outside tonight, and you hear a whistle, I want you to blow on this loud and hard. That way the *Whiitigo* will think you are another *Whiitigo*, looking for a human to devour. Then you will come home safe tonight, and I won't have to stay up worrying about you. Now, *Whiitigos* don't just hunt on calm nights so, I want you to always be aware." *Kokum* inched a little closer to me like she was going to share a secret just between the two of us. She said,

"On windy nights, you can hear the *Whiitigos* flying around outside. You probably thought it

was branches and things being jostled by the wind. It isn't. The sounds you hear on a windy night are the sounds of bony skeletons flying around. They are *Whiitigos* searching for new victims. Some of us Michifs also call them '*Paakuks*' or '*Pakakosh*.' And you know what happens if they touch you?" Just then, a car horn blared and I shrieked and jumped, dropping the whistle to the floor. *Kokum* laughed as I retrieved the piece of metal with the ball inside. "Goodnight, *Kokum*." I said as I kissed her cheek, indulging her in her fun for the evening.

Later that evening, as my Mother and *Kokum* sat on the couch, they heard a loud shrill whistle cut through the calm night air. Mom quickly got up, and moved to the open window. *Kokum* joined her, and they listened to the broken tranquility outside. After a moment they heard another shrill whistle fill the silence. Then, as the moon shone down, they distinctly saw a shape fly by the window where they stood. It looked directly at them. It was a skeleton—*li Paakuk*—and clasped between its teeth was a silver whistle. Mom quickly shut the window, and *Kokum*, ashen-faced, sat in the chair by the fireplace. Silently they stared at each other, shaken yet filled with disbelief.

"Well!" said *Kokum*. "I think I'll wait up for Mary after all."

<sup>1</sup> Michif/Cree for "come here."