

# Mood Wendigo

## by Tom Easton

Analog, May 1980

When did this story begin? It's hard for anyone here in town to say. It looped back on itself and tied its bit of time in a knot. No one is really sure just what happened, though we do know we lost a good boy.

Did it start when Lydia Seltzer told her high school biology class about the wendigo? She was talking about the world's mystery beasts, the Abominable Snowman, the Sasquatch, the Loch Ness Monster and its cousins in other lakes around the world. She told them about all the expeditions, the lack of results, the questions -- are the searchers simply crackpots? Or do elusive things still exist in the hidden corners of the world? And then she mentioned the wendigo, a thing that had never been more than a story, a superstition, something no one had ever believed in enough to check it out. Its name was Indian, and it was known across the Northeast, from Maine to Ontario. It screamed in the night, and anyone who sought the screamer disappeared without a trace. If they ever returned, they were mad, too blown of mind even to say what had happened to them. There were no descriptions of the wendigo.

Or did it start the day our town acquired a second Lydia? Mad she was, and raving, but she was the same Lydia we had all known for a decade. The same wide mouth, the nose a little larger than she liked, the black hair worn short and curled over her collar. Neither was any beauty, but neither were they ugly, and it seemed surprising that she had never married. Or perhaps it was no surprise after all. She was tough-minded as only a woman can be, and she showed it at an unusually young age. Most women wait till their forties and later to show their steel. But not Lydia. She brooked no nonsense, in class or out, and for as long as we had known her she had been given to severely tailored pant suits, wool for work, denim for evenings and weekends.

When did it start? Who can say? The best I can do is tell you where I came into it. That was some time after the wendigo class. I was at home, sitting at the kitchen table, going over the town budget for the fourth time. Sarah, my wife, was in the living room, watching something inane on TV. We didn't talk much anymore, not about her job at the bank, nor about mine. We had no kids.

When the buzzer sounded, I heard her chair creak as she rose to answer the door. There was a murmur of voices, steps in the hall, and "Harry? Miss Seltzer wants to see you." There was a glare with the words. I ignored it, raised my head from the papers and said, "Duty calls, then. Have a seat, Lydia. Coffee, a drink?"

"Do you have any tea?" As Lydia pulled the other chair out from the table, Sarah disappeared. A moment later, the sound of the TV rose, as if to drown out anything that might give my wife's fantasies the lie. But my attention was for Lydia. She seemed more serious than usual, if possible and there was a folded paper jutting from her bag. I wondered what was on her mind as I filled the kettle. I found out soon enough.

She sat still, watching me as I moved about the room, saying nothing until our tea was before us and I had sat down again. Then she said, "Mayor, I need a leave of absence. A short one."

She stirred her cup, squeezed the bag and dumped it in the ashtray half full of my pipe ashes. "Of course," I said: "But shouldn't you be asking the superintendent about this?" I was puzzled. It wasn't my chore to handle the teachers, thank goodness. I was the town's unpaid mayor, and there were professionals, paid ones, to handle day to day affairs.

"I will," she replied. She looked at me, her brown eyes unblinking. I remember thinking that for all her mannishness she would be worth shielding from all grief. Perhaps it was the eyes. Maybe it was just Sarah. "But you can help," she said "You know people, and..."

"But what do you need help with?"

She shrugged and took the paper from her bag. She unfolded it and handed it to me. "Look at this," she said. "It's French-Canadian, a rhyme, collected back in the thirties by the WPA people. I found it in the university library, buried in the folklore files."

The paper was covered with a penciled scrawl, a copy of a poem that must have been set down by someone who wished to capture the flavor of a speech pattern:

Ze Wendigo, Zat crazy beast, 'E never eats, But loves t'go. In darkest night, 'E runs and screams And stirs ze dreams Of second sight. But when you go To join ze run, 'E stays unknown, Ze Wendigo

I packed and lit my pipe, studying the rhyme, before I spoke "Interesting," I said. I sent a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "But what does it have to do with a leave of absence?"

Her fingers tensed around her tea cup. She had come to me, but she seemed unwilling to reveal her problem. Could it be so rare or odd or shameful? Suppose it was, I told myself, and then I guessed the answer.

"You want to go wendigo hunting." I laughed.

Her lips tightened, and I was immediately sorry for the laughter. That was just the reaction she had feared. Of course. No one wants to be thought a nut, a crackpot, even if their ideas are a bit off the beaten track. "But go on," I said, trying to save the situation. "Maybe I can help. At least, I'm game to try."

She relaxed as if that was all she had wanted. I caught a faint whiff of perfume or cologne. And she began to talk. She told me of the wendigo class, of her own interest in the strange, of her sense of fairness that led her to the library, of her conviction that all the legends must reflect some grain of truth, of her wish to seek that truth. She had come to me for suggestions on where to seek, a guess at the chances of success, perhaps even a partner in the strange quest.

Why me? Well, I do have a reputation for imagination. Last year's ad program for my oil business certainly stirred folks up enough. And then there were the gimmicks I had come up with to get more tourists into the area. And then, too, there had been a few incidents now and again to connect me with the strange. Really, I should have been more surprised if Lydia had not come to me.

But what could I do? I wouldn't know a wendigo if I saw one. Or heard one, rather. She was silent while I relit my pipe and thought. She didn't fidget much, only turning her empty cup back and forth between her hands. Finally, I said, "There's at least one fellow in this town who could help. If you'll come to the town hall tomorrow after school, I'll ask him to meet us there."

She nodded and sighed. Her breath whistled as if she had been holding it. So I would help, after all. Her voice was softer when she spoke. "Do you really think we can...?"

"How can we know?" I grimaced, sympathetically, I hoped. "We've no idea what it looks like or where to look. But we can try."

The fellow I wanted to talk to was Howie Wyman. Grizzled, always over-alled and booted, he had been doing odd jobs as long as anyone cared to recall. He knew all the stories, too, though he didn't talk

much. He seemed to prefer the woods and streams to human company, even his wife, but he was in town at the time, painting a house over on Water Street. I sent a secretary to ask him to come by a little after three.

I was still alone when he showed up, a motley collection of paint spatters, whiskers, and faded cloth completely alien to any civilized conception of a government office. My secretary showed him in, though, as if he were clad in a three-piece suit and fresh from the barber, which tells you something about our town. It's informal. Partly because it's small and partly because its people waste little energy on nonessential appearances. They dress up mostly for church and they try to keep their drinking private.

I said, "Thank you, Bonny," and waved Howie to a seat. He took it, looked for my wastebasket, and got rid of his wad of chewing tobacco. "You wanted me, Mayor."

"Ayuh." I said. "Lydia Seltzer dragged me in on a project of hers. I thought you might be able to tell us something helpful."

"Like what?" He looked doubtful. He knew Lydia was the science teacher, and he knew nothing about science. I doubted he'd ever gotten past the sixth grade. I was starting to tell him about the problem when Lydia walked in, Bonny holding the door until I waved at her. Her wool was pink today. and her face was flushed with eagerness. The combination wasn't attractive, but I didn't imagine it was anything but temporary. I hoped she wouldn't be disappointed.

I introduced Howie to Lydia. "This is the fellow I was talking about. I was just going to tell him the problem."

She took the other chair. "Shall I go on, then?" When I nodded, she produced that paper again and then handed it to Howie. While he read, she said what she wanted, flatly and directly. The nervousness I had seen last night was gone.

When she finished, Howie set the paper on the corner of my desk and said simply, "Pork Hill." I raised my eyebrows, and he went on. "My dad was up there once. Ayuh, huntin' deer in the dark of the moon. He heard that scream. Didn't see nothin', though."

"Where's Pork Hill?"

"North by west, 'bout ten miles."

And that was all he had for us.

We now had a place to look, and the next dark of the moon was just two weeks away' in case that mattered. Lydia could hardly wait. She insisted on borrowing a tent, sleeping bags, a Coleman stove, all the gear anyone could want for a night camping on a lonely hilltop. She got most of it from two members of the school board. She got their sons, too. Keith Hutchison and Ronny Jackson were two of her best students, and she thought they deserved a field trip, a little hands-on research. They thought so too, especially since it meant a Friday away from school. I didn't argue, since I was sure we could meet no danger from a superstition.

I wish I had been right. Keith was a lanky boy, tall, a forward on the school basketball team. Ronny was shorter, sturdier, a soccer player. Both had family, friends, girl friends, good prospects. Keith, in fact, already had a scholarship for college. They had a lot to lose, but they were eager. Danger was just a myth, and they wouldn't miss this trip for worlds.

They didn't, of course. I didn't believe in any danger myself, so I didn't try to talk them out of it, and

Lydia made it sound like a lark. All the way up there, the four of us and the gear crowded into my old station wagon, she waved her camera and ran on about the splash a picture of a real, live wendigo would make.

We loaded the car on Thursday night and left town shortly after noon on Friday. When we met in the town hall lot, I was surprised to see Lydia in dungarees and a red-checked wool shirt. It was so unlike her that, even though the rest of us were dressed similarly, she seemed to stand out. But the clothes were suitable for the trip, and I soon stopped noticing them.

It took us half an hour to reach the foot of Pork Hill, and another two hours to hump the gear to the top. The hill wasn't big, no more than eight hundred feet high, but it was steep and wooded and there was no path. The going was slow until we reached the top, where the trees disappeared. Pork Hill was one of those rocky knobs scattered over the state of Maine, its top scraped clean by glaciers and still inhabited only by lichen, moss, blueberry bushes, and a few stunted birches.

We pitched the tent in a mossy hollow between boulders, and the boys went back down the hill to gather firewood. There were plenty of fallen branches there, and though we had the stove, a fire was a comforting thing to have at night. Even small mountains can get chilly after dark.

By supertime, the woodpile was large enough to last a week. We had all taken time to explore the hilltop, too, following Lydia as she sought some clue to what a wendigo might be, some trace of something strange. We found nothing but glacial scours and animal droppings and a few weathered shotgun shells, though Lydia was hardly discouraged. As she said when the boys were finally kindling their fire, "It is a traveler, they say. Maybe it never stops here."

I said something which I now wish I hadn't. Though it probably didn't change a thing. "Then you'll have to move quickly to get a picture of it. It won't be waiting for you."

"I suppose I will," she said, fingering the camera on its strap around her neck. She bent, then, to the totebag she had brought and extracted a flash, one of those electronic ones that don't need bulbs. "I'd better be ready."

We ate -- hamburgers and potato salad and coffee and bakery pie -- and sat around the fire staring, satisfied for the moment by the mystery of its flames. Only Lydia turned her head now and again to the darkness, straining to see what she waited for. But there was nothing but the odor of earth and growing things, the sight of stars like raindrops on a windshield. The air turned chill enough for sweaters, and we listened to the chirps and buzzes of insects, the lazy notes of sleepy birds, the small croaks of tree frogs, and the rare crackling of brush as some animal -- deer, coon, rabbit, coyote, even a wild house cat -- passed within hearing.

We talked, of what it meant to be a mayor or a teacher or a student, of sports and fishing and hunting, of politics and taxes. We told no ghost stories, though. I suppose that must have been because our mission was too much like such a tale. It would have been tempting fate to describe horrors and frights, and fate never needed tempting.

Eventually, we talked ourselves out and let the fire die. We were readying ourselves for the sleeping bags, washing up, brushing teeth, when it happened. We heard a moan at first, low as if far distant, swelling loud and clear and close. At its peak it sounded like a baby must when it is being dipped in boiling oil.

It was a little after midnight and as black as the inside of a closet. We had been using the light of an electric lantern as well as the glow of the coals. We had been contained in a small and cozy room, but that sound broke down the walls. I shuddered, and Lydia ran, the soap and water spilled on the moss,

her camera ready in her hand, Keith hot on her heels. Ronny would have gone too, but I held him still with a hand on his shoulder. "Let go!" he cried. "I want to see it too!"

"Remember the stories," I said as softly as I could over the dying scream. "Someone should mind the camp." He subsided as I'd hoped he would. When the scream was gone and the night was again silent, I added, "Now. Now we can look for them."

We took our flashlights and tried to follow the marks Lydia and Keith had crushed into the moss as they ran. But the tracks soon disappeared in the tangled skein of prints we had made earlier that afternoon. We called and shouted. We covered every inch of that hilltop, again and again, shining our lights down cracks in the rock and under bushes, checking the bottom of every drop we came across, large or small. We searched until our batteries were exhausted, and then we huddled around a rebuilt fire, worrying, starting at every crackle of brush.

With the dawn, we searched and called again, but we had no better luck. Lydia and Keith had vanished without a trace, just as in the legends. I was closer than ever before to believing in the wendigo, and thus in ghosts, banshees, and all the rest of what I had once dismissed as so much claptrap.

Our second search soon ended in futility. We made a hasty breakfast, doused the fire, and broke camp. Then we lugged the gear back to the car. It took longer, since there were fewer of us now. I had plenty of time to berate myself, to think I should never have helped Lydia with her obsession, never have let the boys come along, never have come myself. But who could have expected a myth to be real? Who could have guessed it would cost us half our party? And what was the wendigo? What was it that made a sound that swelled and faded like a freight train's whistle, that screamed like a soul in torment? Like a god on a cosmic treadmill? If only I had known, I might have left the boys in town, but I would still have come with Lydia, hoping to protect her, shield her. I felt as I might for the child I didn't have, and I mourned.

Ronny was less thoughtful. He shivered when he thought of the night, and once he dropped his load with a clatter of pans. He had lost a teacher and a friend. He might have been lost himself. The horror of that scream had almost touched him, and he could barely control his thoughts. He stayed close to me, keeping a wary eye on the woods around us, talking endlessly, trying to imagine what had happened to the others. He failed to disrupt my thoughts only because I was as obsessed myself. There was no conversation. He talked on, while I muttered responsive noises, and we both scurried around our separate skulls, like rats seeking the way out of a trap.

By mid-morning, we were back in town. I stopped the car in front of the town hall. The police station was across the street. We would have to go there first, of course. Missing persons, runaways, lost in the woods, carried off by a mythical beast, had to be reported, search parties organized, motions gone through even if they could do no good. Ronny was still talking, muttering, his skin a cold and clammy white, his eyes glazed. I helped him out of the car and steered him across the road. I remember being glad he hadn't collapsed while we had work to do. It would have been a shame to leave all that gear on top of Pork Hill.

Our town's Chief of Police was a heavy-bellied man whose moon face wore a thin mustache. He was young, about thirty, and as competent as we needed. Most of his energies were spent on rounding up drunks and vandals, occasional burglars, and the odd con man. He could do the work because the town was small and the crime rate low, but he could never hope to improve his lot. He would grow old in the job, the gut would sag, the cheeks jowl and the eyes go piggish. The tattoos on his forearms would fade, and somewhere along the line we would have to get rid of him. I wouldn't miss him; no one would. His sense of social class was far too keen.

When we entered his office, he rose and said, "G'morning, Mayor! I thought you were going wendigo hunting yesterday?"

"We did," I said shortly.

"Ah!" He grinned jovially, as if we shared some secret. "Stealing a march on your great white huntress, hey?"

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked. I was irritated by his tone, impatient with what had to be nothing but nonsense. But his next words set me back. "Lydia Seltzer. She didn't go with you."

It didn't sound like a question, but what else could it be? "Of course she did. That's why I'm here now. She disappeared last night. She and Keith Hutchison."

The Chief plopped his bulk back into his swivel chair. He looked startled. "But..." Then he paused, looking at Ronny as if for the first time. "What's the matter with him?"

"Shock and exhaustion," I said. "We were up all night, searching for them. Maybe one of your men would get him over to the hospital and tell his parents where he is."

"Of course, Mayor." He pushed a button on his desk intercom. Then he said, "Maybe you'll tell me what happened when..." A patrolman entered, was given his instructions, and left with Ronny. The Chief turned back to me. "Now," he said.

I gave him the story. He nodded when I was done. "The shock I can understand," he said. "But why didn't you get here hours ago?"

"I didn't think it wise to go stumbling through the woods in the dark. Besides, I hoped we might find something in the morning."

"Not that it really makes a difference. A search party wouldn't do any good."

"Why not? They could still be there someplace! Maybe they fell in a hole we didn't see, or got lost in the woods."

"No." He shook his head and rose again. "C'mon. I'll show you."

He led me back to the small cell block. When we entered the narrow corridor, lined with steel bars, I could hear a noise, a jabbering sound, wordless, random. Or almost random. As he steered me toward the noise, I began to pick out shreds that might hold meaning: "fetal train," "stars and stars," "hopper freight," "take yon train," and more, though those were clearest. I wondered what madman he was holding here. And then we faced the last cell in the row. Through the bars, I made out a form strapped onto the narrow bunk, head tossing, face bruised and scratched, denim and wool clothes torn and soiled. It was Lydia.

The Chief spoke. "We picked her up like that yesterday afternoon. She walked into town, went straight to the school, and tried to get into her classroom, raving all the time, just like this. The substitute called the principal, and he called us. I'm waiting for the judge to sign the papers now, and then one of the men'll drive her to Augusta."

AMHI. The Augusta Mental Health Institute. Where they would try to bring her back, perhaps with drugs and electric shocks. But what else could anyone do? I turned away.

Back in the Chief's office, I remembered Lydia's camera. Did he have it? He did, along with everything

that had been in her pockets. "Then perhaps," I said, "it might be a good idea to have the film developed. She could have got her pictures after all, and they could help the doctors understand what's wrong with her now."

"Of course," he said, and I left. I wanted sleep, but I should return the gear Lydia had borrowed first and tell Keith's family what had happened. Then, maybe, I could begin to puzzle over how Lydia had disappeared last night and reappeared yesterday. Time travel was impossible, wasn't it?

The Hutchisons and Jacksons were enraged. With me, with Lydia, with the town, with the school. One boy lost, another ill, but the lost one most on their minds. Jack Hutchison swore he would run against me come the next election, sue me for every penny I had, have Lydia fired if she ever regained her wits. But the prospect of no longer being mayor didn't bother me -- after all, it didn't pay -- and the trip had officially been a school field trip, and the school had insurance to cover lawsuits.

And then that fuss died down. The pictures came out. Lydia had her wendigo, twice. One shot showed a line of shiny boxes stretching down a gleaming tunnel. The other showed Keith walking away from the camera, hand in hand with a figure that wasn't human, through a vast cavern of a room. The shiny boxes covered the floor of that room, and they were surrounded by machines that bore vague resemblances to freight dollies and forklift trucks.

I could guess what the wendigo really was. An interstellar freight train, its tracks looping close to Earth at certain times and places, a freight that could be hopped by anyone who got too close to its passing field. "Fetal"? Maybe "ftl," faster than light. By "take yon" had she meant "tachyon"? I read enough to know what that was, how it might fit, and Keith was alive and well, Earth's envoy to other worlds. Lydia, on the other hand, had been sent back on the next train, going faster than light, backward in time just enough to get her home a day before she left.

By the time Lydia stopped raving and returned to her job, Pork Hill could no longer be visited, either by deer poachers or by would-be interstellar hobos. The army had taken it over, and it was now ringed by wire fence and armed guards while the experts tried to find a way to flag some passing train down.

I don't know if they'll succeed. Lydia can't tell us anything, since she now seems to have no memory of her journey, and if it weren't for that last picture of Keith I'd be tempted to compare us to the moose. For years, the rutting bulls would answer train whistles by charging down the tracks into the engine. To the bull moose, it seems, the whistles sounded like the cry of a cow in heat, and they never learned the difference. The slaughter only stopped when the companies changed the note of the whistles.

But we can't be the equivalent of animals running head-on against an oblivious technology. After all, who among us would walk out of a railway station hand in hand -- or hoof in hand -- with a moose?

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