

## **The Nothing Man**

In an old town in Nova Scotia, there was a school. The yard was empty most of the time. There were the usual things. A sand-box. Swings. A slide. Now, why was it so quiet out there? There should've been kids running around, making lots of noise, screaming and throwing balls or snowballs or something.

But, no. It was so quiet. The kids have been either inside the school or at home.

The kids were afraid.

You see, there were foot-prints seen near the swings. Really BIG footprints. Big enough to put two grown up human feet inside. And the swings kept getting broken. Like someone really LARGE was using them.

And the footprints led to the forest near the school. The kids followed them but when they got as far as the woods, they turned back. Better to leave him, whoever he was, to his own. Just as long as he kept to himself.

The kids called him "The Nothing Man" because when ever someone asked them what they were afraid of, they said, "Nothing".

The old town was very old. People had been here for a long time. Everyone knew each other. Chances were, if you walked down the street, you'd pass someone, and you'd both stop and talk about this and that.

There was one kid that EVERYONE knew. He played volley-ball, and hockey, and just about any sport you could think up. He was pretty good, too. He didn't brag about his scores or anything. He just played for the fun of it and everyone was proud of him.

He was the kind of kid that stood up for what he believed in, even if it meant that some one could turn against him. Usually they didn't. Because he backed up his words with deeds. Because he defended little kids from bullies. Because he was good to his sister and brother and friends.

If you have a friend like that, be good to him or her, because some day, you'll need someone to be kind to you.

One day, while he was walking home from a volley ball game, he sense something moving in the trees. Then he heard it!

A whistling sound came from the woods that echoed all around him. It made the hairs on his neck stand up and his back stiffen like a plank.

Fear.

He crouched down and made himself small, and waited.

Then he SAW it!

A big man, three times his height, came out of the trees and lumbered towards the school-yard. Nothing Man went to the window of the cafeteria and looked in for what seemed like an eternity. Then the beast walked over to the swings. It didn't get on, just pushed one of them and let it swing. It stood there and watched the swing go back and forth, back and forth until it came to a stop. For a moment, it looked like it was looking right at the boy. Then, shoulders slumped and beard swaying, the Nothing Man went back to the woods.

It took a long time for the boy's heart to stop pounding. It took a long time for him to move. When he did, it was the fastest run he'd ever done. He was home in seconds flat, in his room and as his parents asked him what was wrong, he said, "Nothing!"

The boy didn't tell anyone what he'd seen. He ran home every day. He didn't go to any practices unless there was a ride home. Something had been shaken loose in him. His dreams were filled with Giants and whistling noises.

Then he thought, this is ridiculous. I need to see him again. So, one day he hid in the bushes and waited for the Nothing Man to come out of the woods. He had a juice box in his pocket and left it by the swing. He watched the Nothing Man pick up the box and go into the woods with it. Then left an orange by the window of the cafeteria. Then a sandwich. He hid and saw the Nothing Man pick up the gift and walk with it back to the woods, shoulders a little straighter each time. The boy's heart still pounded like it was going to pop out of his chest every time he saw the Nothing Man. But maybe a little less every day.

One day the Nothing Man picked up a Coke and looked directly at the Boy and said, in a whistling way, "Thank you."

The boy thought about it, then slowly, slowly, he stood up. It took so much effort to stand up. But he did it. The Nothing Man walked toward him. The boy stood his ground and when their feet were facing each other, the boy said, "You're welcome".

They looked at each other for a minute and then the man said, "I'm Nuk-Luk."

"You speak Mi'Kmaq!" The boy said

"Yes," said Nuk-Luk. "But I speak Dene much better."

"What's that?" asked the boy.

“That’s the people to the West. Near the other ocean.”

“The Pacific?”

“Yes.”

“How did you get here?”

“I got on a train. My home was cut down by loggers. I felt like a different view.”

“Don’t you miss your home?”

“Sometimes”

The boy thought about this.

“How long have you been in our woods?”

“Three of your generations”

“Wow. That’s a long time”

Then they heard voices. Nuk-luk dropped his Coke and ran into the woods.

This all happened years ago. As time passed, the boy and Nuk-luk talked about this and that. Nuk-luk brought out gifts for the boy, too. There were plants with healing berries and leaves. There were mosses that you could make flames with, by using a spark from a stone. There were feathers and tree barks and stories and songs.

The boy grew taller, stronger. He was going away to more and more tournaments away from home. Off to Halifax, off to places like Fredericton and Moncton. These absences were sad for Nuk-Luk., who went back to the woods and slept and waited.

One day, as the boy was packing for another trip to the mainland, he heard a loud BOOM! He ran to the window and saw a big plume of smoke rising from the direction of the school!

He ran out the door, and saw that other people were running too. The smoke was coming from the roof of the school, and sticking out was the tail of an airplane! The flames were climbing higher and higher and the people were afraid to go into the building. The boy looked around and heard screaming. Only this wasn’t in the school. People were running all over the place.

Nuk-luk was behind him, running towards the school.

Nuk-luk smashed the window of the cafeteria with his bare hands and crawled inside. Then moments later, he emerged with the pilot of the plane. He went back again and again until he had brought out four people. They were hurt badly. Nuk-luk was coughing. Every time he gently set down a person he went back in.

When he sat on the ground, he said. "That's all of them". His beard was singed and his arms and back were burned. He closed his eyes.

The people couldn't believe their eyes. Then one of the Elders spoke.

"Nuk-luk. I thought you were in one of my dreams."

The boy was astonished. "You knew him?"

Another spoke. "We need to get him some help"

They gently picked him up. It took six grown men to lift him. They took the four victims to the hospital. But Nuk-luk, they thought they'd better take him to one of the houses. They didn't want the scientists to find out about him.

Whenever the press asked them what they knew about the man who saved the crash victims, they smiled and answered, "Nothing!"

The Elders used the healing leaves and berries and made medicine for Nuk-luk. They stayed with him and talked and drummed and sang to him until he opened his eyes. Then, a few weeks later, he told them,

"I'd like to go home. Can someone give me a ride?"

Nuk-luk went home in a nice big moving van. They took him to a quiet spot in the Nahanni National Park and had one last fire with him. He had tears in his eyes as they sang and laughed and told their stories about the first time they'd met him. How afraid they'd all been. How they got to know each other. How they'd protected him. How he'd protected them.

That boy was now a young man. He occasionally went back to the Yukon and brought oranges for Nuk-luk. Then one day, he came to the usual spot and Nuk-luk was gone. Probably got the wandering again and moved on. There was a little note tucked into the root of a tree next to where the fire use to be.

"It's okay to be afraid. It takes a courageous person to do something, even when it takes everything you have just to stand up. When you know that you can't turn back. When you reach out to others who are afraid. Take care of yourself. Your friend, The Nothing Man."