GEORGE BONGA: BLACK VOYAGEUR

# BY CARLYLE BROWN

## A COMMISSION FOR THE HISTORY THEATRE

SECOND DRAFT

*LEECH LAKE 1866*

BONGA

What trouble can it be, tracking a man in the snow? Unless he can fly like a bird in the sky, turn his self into a snow shadow or a mist rising up from a frozen stream. There always will be a trail behind him…a path of his own making showing signs telling his weight, his height, the stride of his gait, the state of his condition, the nature of his mind. You’ll see where his left foot goes deeper when he looks over his right shoulder to see who’s following behind. There’ll be panic in his footsteps, fear in his tracks. The faster he runs the easier the trail to follow. And if he’s foolish enough to cross a frozen lake with all the sounds of cracking and booming where the ice is growing thicker and deeper you’ll see him clear a speck in the distance going to a place that he thinks is safe and sheltered and warm with some lingering sense of home. And then you can just walk him down like a deer on the run until you catch him with his nostrils flaring and his chest heaving, breathing his last breath.

ASHWINN

It takes patience…

BONGA

Yes Patience.

ASHWINN

One has to be determined…

BONGA

Yes, determination too.

ASHWINN

Wood wise…

BONGA

…Wise? …Maybe.

ASHWINN

But Che-ga-wa-skung was not such a man. He was lovesick. He was lovelorn. He sought his revenge but he missed his mark. The Aitkin boy should have minded his own business. It was an affair between a man, his lover and her husband. To step into that is like walking between a mother bear and her cub. You can only get mauled. Only a white man’s law can try to make sense of such a thing as lawless as love. The trail you were following was marked with Che-ga-wa-skung’s tears. But for all your skill as a tracker you didn’t see them in his footsteps did you Bonga?

BONGA

I was still young then. I didn’t know what love was. If there were tears in his tracks they were just frozen ground to me.

ASHWINN

His capture made you famous.

BONGA

Yes, famous to the whites, but infamous among the Indians.

ASHWINN

We have forgiven you Bonga. Am I not your wife? We are all relations. You know your obligations. You fulfill your duties. You are good to us.

BONGA

I try.

ASHWINN

Then why do you still dream of him?

BONGA

A dream is not something you wish for. It comes to you unwanted on its own of its own will.

ASHWINN

Listen to you, a big man like you afraid of his dreams. Maybe I should make you a dream catcher to keep your bad dreams away like we did with our boys when they were babies.

BONGA

Stop it. It’s not a joke. We got us enough troubles in our daylight hours without me having fretful dreams about Che-ga-wa-skung. Dreamt about him last night, he was on my mind this morning while I was going over to see Agent Clark. It was like carrying around a sack of bad luck.

ASHWINN

So you spoke with Agent Clark.

BONGA

Yes, I spoke with Agent Clark for all the good that it did me.

ASHWINN

What did he say?

BONGA

He said no.

ASHWINN

…No?

BONGA

It might as well have been no. I took my application with my bond and my letter of commendation and I handed it to him. He looks it all over and fumbles and mumbles awhile and says leave them with him and he’ll send it on to Washington. “Washington” he says and they’re making payments at Crow Wing and Red Lake next week. He wants me to wait for permission from Washington and I need a trader’s license in my hand right now. I tell him I got delivery coming on goods paid in cash and on credit. I don’t sell them I’m going to lose my shirt. He’s just waging his head like some dumb dog, saying, “There’s nothing I can do. Nothing I can do.” “I have to follow the rules and do what’s lawful”, he says. And he’s stealing from the cookie jar every chance he gets.

ASHWINN

Is there any hope?

BONGA

Not while Clark is under the thumb of those two damned rascals Ruffee and Aspinwall. They got a monopoly over everything.

ASHWINN

…Monopoly?

BONGA

They control the whole damn thing, the payments and where the payments are made, who gets paid, how much they get paid, whose goods gets traded and at what price they’re traded for. They got it all locked up. No one can get a license but the two of them. Clark wouldn’t issue a license to his mother unless Ruffee and Aspinwall tell him so.

ASHWINN

They say that Chief Hole in the Day won’t take his annuity money from the hands of Agent Clark.

BONGA

Well, if he doesn’t take his money from the hands of Clark, I don’t know how he’s going to get it, unless he crushes his head with a hatchet. Besides I don’t believe Hole in the Day will let his people starve just to make a point. Without that money they can’t buy any goods.

ASHWINN

My father’s people, they will come to you for what they need.

BONGA

I don’t know if that’s a good idea. My boxes haven’t arrived. Even if Clark had issued me a traders’ license I have no goods to trade. And I don’t know what advice I can give the Indians, but to take their money and not make any fuss with Clark and the government. The soldiers already passed by the other day on their way to Red Lake. And all our boys are out there on the frontier on their own. Best we can do is lay low and wait for better times.

ASHWINN

Some say the hunt for muskrats will be good this year.

BONGA

Yes, Muskrats, but no beaver.

ASHWINN

We have lots of rice stored.

BONGA

What, rice every day?

ASHWINN

Send for our boys and go on a winter hunt.

BONGA

Winter hunt would be good.

ASHWINN

You know something Bonga?

BONGA

What?

ASHWINN

You sound like an old woman or a spoiled child. Many people who have come for their payment are far from their home country. It is late in the year and if the snow falls heavy their trail will be long with suffering. And all you can do is sit by the fire and complain about how terrible life is. And sometimes it is. Life is hard Bonga. And living? Well let’s just say that living is a hard way to die. But today you have a wife who loves you, food in your belly, high wine in your glass and tobacco in your pipe. Smoke your pipe and be at peace with yourself.

BONGA

You’re shaming me now.

ASHWINN

No, I’m not shaming you I’m telling you the truth. The boxes of goods are late, but they will come and when Clark and his traders are gone the people will come to you.

BONGA

Why would they come to me?

ASHWINN

What kind of question is that? Because they have to survive and because you are one of us, you belong to us.

BONGA

I never belonged to anything. I thought I did, but I don’t. I’ve always been on the edges of things, on the boundaries but never crossing over.

ASHWINN

You know the trouble with you men is that you think you’re supposed to be lonely, but you don’t really want to be lonely at all. Do you? You have to cast this thing out, these dreams of Che-ga-wa-skung.

BONGA

My dreams are not for you to worry over. They are none of your affair.

ASHWINN

None of my affair you say. I sleep with you don’t I? Don’t you think your dreams spill over on me? All I can do is kick you so you roll over and I can get back to sleeping with your loud and peaceful snoring. …Maybe it isn’t a dream. Maybe it’s a vision and it keeps coming back to you because you won’t listen to it.

BONGA

So, what do you want me to do about it?

ASHWINN

Make it go away.

BONGA

Make it go away how?

ASHWINN

Tell it to me again.

BONGA

I’ve already told it to you before. What good is it to tell it over again?

ASHWINN

Because it will be different every time, that is the way dreams are in the telling. A track becomes a trail and a trail becomes a road. After a while you can see where you’re going. This dream, memory, nightmare or whatever it is you’re having isn’t about Che-ga-wa-skung, it’s about you.

BONGA

You think it’s some kind of vision quest or something hey? I never went on a vision quest when I was boy, even though my mother was an Indian. My French speaking Negro father sent me to a white school in Montreal to educate my mind so I could work with my back all my life. …Reading, writing and arithmetic in a room full of white boys, half-breeds and me, big, black and different.

ASHWINN

Then maybe it’s time you had one.

BONGA

What are you saying to me? …A vision quest at my age?

ASHWINN

…Maybe. Tell me the dream again.

BONGA

…Again? …Well, like I said before, it was here on Leech Lake 1837. . It was the year before the treaty signing at Ft. Snelling when all the land scheming and land stealing… before I took any interest in what they call Indian affairs. I was too busy taking care of my own affairs. Things were looking pretty good then. We didn’t know what was coming. I was out here smoking my pipe and minding what was then Aitkin’s store when I hear him calling my name from out of the woods.

*CROSS FADE*

*LEECH LAKE 1837*

*In the dark we hear*

Bonga! …Bonga!

*LIGHTS UP/AITKEN AND BONGA*

Bonga

…Mister Aitkin?

AITKIN

Bonga you have to help me. I suppose you heard about what happen to my boy Alfred.

BONGA

Yes, I did. …I’m sorry for your loss sir.

AITKIN

That Indian murdered my boy George. He took him from me. Shot him cold blooded like you’d kill a critter to get something to eat. And it wasn’t like Alfred wasn’t an Indian too. He was a half-breed, but he was my son. Just a trader on the lake providing them with the things they need for survival and one of them kills my boy.

BONGA

I understand how you must feel sir.

AITKIN

How I feel? I don’t know how I feel. But if I did feel…if I allowed myself to feel I would feel nothing but vengeance. I feel that if I found him only the hand of Almighty God could hold me from slicing him with my knife and cutting him up into little, bitty pieces and spreading him out on the ground for the dogs to feed on.

BONGA

As long as you’ve been in this country it’s terrible to hear you speak like this sir.

AITKIN

I’ve been in this country long enough to have had it up to here with the high pretensions of some of these Indians. You remember the two employees of the Missouri Fur Company they murdered on the Missouri River back in ’20.

BONGA

No sir, I was with Mr. Cass where he was looking for the head waters of the Mississippi in ’20.

AITKIN

…And the massacre of the Hess family on the Goose River in ’22?

BONGA

I was with you in ’22 sir. Remember? We were up at the post on Basswood Lake together.

AITKIN

And the four white men robbed and murdered at Lake Pepin in ’24.

BONGA

Yes sir.

AITKIN

And just now while I was gone from Sandy Lake they killed and devoured some of Reverend Boutwell’s mission cattle which he would have given to them just for the asking. Threating folks to give them goods on credit, never to be paid I’m sure. It’s outrageous and promises to get worse.

BONGA

They’re all disaffected with the Government sir and the promises it don’t seem to keep.

AITKIN

Disaffection, be damned. They think we are weak is what it is and if they don’t get in line the Government is eventually going to have to make war on them and exterminate every last one of them.

BONGA

Begging your pardon sir, I know your blood is hot and you’re in your grief, but we’re only talking about one Indian here. Am I right?

AITKIN

Yes my blood is hot and vengeance is in my heart, God save me. That’s why I need you with me Bonga.

BONGA

And why is that sir.

AITKIN

I’ve got a party of men to go with me, mostly Frenchmen and half-breeds. We march tonight for Red Cedar Lake and while their asleep we’ll take them at dawn. You know the country. You speak the languages, French, English, and Chippewa. You’re respected among the Indians. You’re a good tracker. And most importantly I need another white man beside me.

BONGA

Meaning me sir?

AITKIN

You know what I mean. Like Alfred you’ve had a good Christian education. If the Almighty means for me to do justice in this affair then he’s going need a little help to steady my hand this night. You understand my meaning?

BONGA

Yes sir.

AITKIN

Then grab your gear and your musket we’re moving fast. We’ve got a long march ahead of us.

BONGA

Who is it we’re going after sir?

AITKIN

His name is Che-ga-wa-skung. You know him?

BONGA

No sir.

AITKIN

Well, you will soon enough.

*END OF SCENE*

*RED CEDAR LAKE, January 13*

*Che-ga-wa-skung sits and waits*

*His brother ENTERS*

BROTHER

Che-ga-wa-skung. …Are you all right?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

No, I’m not alright. Did you go?

BROTHER

…To Lake Winnebagoshish?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Yes to Lake Winnebagoshish.

BROTHER

Yes. I just got back and came straight to you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Did you see her?

BROTHER

Yes, I saw her. She is very beautiful brother.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You already know she is beautiful. You have seen her before. She is from here. What did she say?

BROTHER

I had to wait until she was alone. I followed her while she was collecting fire wood and…

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Well, what did she say?

BROTHER

She said she didn’t want to see you anymore.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You’re a liar!

BROTHER

I am not a liar. How can you say that to me? Why would I lie to you? It’s true. She says you’ve caused her nothing but trouble. That she wants to stay with her husband and wants nothing to do with you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It’s not true. Either you’re lying or she was lying to you. She loves me I tell you. I know it. I should have gone to see her myself.

BROTHER

It is. I’m sorry to say it but it’s true. There was nothing but anger in her eyes when she spoke of you. She told me to tell you plainly that she does not love you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

She wouldn’t say that if she were in my arms. I want her to look me in my eyes and tell me herself she doesn’t love me anymore.

BROTHER

You must get over her. Forget about her.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

How can I get over her? She’s in my mind, in my mouth, in the air. She’s everywhere.

BROTHER

But she wants nothing to do with you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I don’t believe you. Maybe it was a trick. Maybe her husband followed you and she knew he was listening in the woods. He might beat her. He’s done it before to try to keep us apart. I will only believe it when I hear it come from her lips.

BROTHER

What are you going to do?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I’m going to Winnebagoshish to hear the truth from her mouth.

BROTHER

No, you mustn’t do that. Everyone is on the lookout for you. I barely got away from that village without a beating myself, just because I am you brother.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I am not afraid of any of them.

BROTHER

But they fear you and what you’ve done.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

What have I done but pursue the woman I love.

BROTHER

You killed a trader. And not just any trader, you killed the son of William Aitkin, the chief of all the traders in our country.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Aitkin’s son should have minded his own business. It was he who sent her away along with that coward of a husband of hers to Winnebagoshish.

BROTHER

The husband worked for the trader. It was trader’s obligation to take his part.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

How can she love such a dog, who barks every time that white man calls? And who is this trader who dares to stand between me and my woman.

BROTHER

She is not your woman. When you went to the post she was already gone. You were drunk. You tried to chop down the man’s store with an axe and when he tried to stop you, you shot him.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It was the husband I wanted to shoot at first and for a time I wanted her to die too, die like I am dying now for want of her.

BROTHER

Listen to me brother you have to get ahold of yourself. No one wants to have anything to do with you. Our people cannot get ammunition or whisky or tobacco since you killed Aitkin’s son. Some say that the traders will not winter in our country anymore. That they will shut down the trade.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

How will the white men get rich if they shut down the trade?

BROTHER

Yes, the trade is good for everyone. And there are many who would give you up to keep it open. You have become an enemy to the whites and a pariah to your own people. Your lover and her husband are disgraced and you are cut off. Don’t you see that this is what stands before you?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I didn’t mean to kill the trader. I was drunk, angry, I had a gun. All together they had a life of their own. And all for a woman who doesn’t love me?

BROTHER

I wish it were not true. I would rather be a liar than to have to tell you this. But all our people will suffer unless you turn yourself in for killing the trader or else go away and leave this place.

CHE-GA-WA-SKING

And where will I go?

BROTHER

I don’t know, north to Canada maybe. I don’t know.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You want me to go now, travel north in the winter?

BROTHER

What else can you do? You can’t stay here any longer. The time is winter and it is time to go. You must do this brother. You have no other choice. You must make this sacrifice not for yourself, but for all of us.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I hear your words and I have no words to defend me from their truth. You must forgive me if all you hear from me because of them is silence.

BROTHER

…We will talk more about it later. For now come, we should seek shelter from the cold and build us a fire.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

No. I want to feel the chill around me. I want this still winter night to be my bed. I want to make a blanket of the snow and sleep to wake up to a cold death in a land of peace. Because you see brother there is no peace without her. I am all alone now.

*END OF SCENE*

*THE TRAIL – DAY 1*

*BONGA and AITKIN come upon an abandoned camp ground*

AITKIN

Well Bonga, what do you think?

BONGA

Well, two fellows were over by the lake shore there, first one, then the other. Looking at the moonlight and having a parley I guess. Then some other fellows come along in the night, five or six of them I would venture, and set up this camp when the two from the lake shore joined up with them. Then they broke camp somewhere near dawn I reckon and now we got a lot of tracks splitting off in pairs going every which a way, and a single track going off in this direction.

AITKIN

The chief didn’t have any trouble telling us the fellow we’re looking for was out this way, so his tracks must be one of these.

BONGA

The question is which one. What did you say this Che-ga-wa-skung fellow looks like?

AITKIN

I never laid eyes on him to tell you the truth. But from what they tell me he’s about my height and weight give or take.

BONGA

That’s it?

AITKIN

As far as I know.

BONGA

But he’s an Indian right?

AITKIN

Yes, he’s an Indian.

BONGA

You know some folks think all Indians look alike.

AITKIN

Now Bonga you know it ain’t that way with me. I know all Indians don’t look alike. Hell, I’m married to one.

BONGA

It’s kind of hard to tell from your description. I mean how were you going to pick him out from all the others if we had caught them here before they broke camp?

AITKIN

We would’ve compelled the others to call the culprit to our attention.

BONGA

Forgive me sir, but that don’t seem very reliable to me.

AITKIN

I thought we’d surprise them, thought we’d get here before dawn.

BONGA

We’re a big party with a sled and two yelping dogs, all the talking, the Frenchmen singing making a lot of noise. We’re too big and too many. We can’t move faster than slow and you can make us out from a long way off. *(Looking off stage)* Look at our party over there stomping around making more tracks and making a mess of the tracks that are already there.

AITKIN

Hey, you fellows quite stomping around and sit down or something! You’re messing up the tracks! …All these tracks, now we have to split up.

BONGA

Seems like it. …Now, if you’re right about his height then this fellow here is way too tall. Look at his stride, look at his gait. He’s a big one. …And as for the weight this fellow is fat or else he’s carrying a heavy load. And then he’s not leaning forward to bear any load, so I guess he’s just fat. …Some of these fellows don’t seem to be moving very fast. More like they’re taking a stroll more than anything. They don’t track like they feel they’re being chased.

AITKIN

But they didn’t know we were coming.

BONGA

What we’re looking at here Mr. Aitkin is a map of the meeting of minds. A plan has been made and executed with the express purpose to confound us. We were no surprise to these fellows.

AITKIN

Well, how would they know?

BONGA

Like I said, we’re too loud and too busy. …This track here the plain single foot prints. These ones are interesting to me.

AITKIN

How so?

BONGA

They seem urgent or something. Like he’s carrying a heavy load, but it ain’t on his back.

AITKIN

Those tracks are going in the wrong direction. They’re headed into Sioux country. That’s no place for a lone Chippewa. He’s only headed into the arms of death if he’s going that way.

BONGA

You said he was pining for this other man’s wife. Maybe he wants to die. Besides just because his tracks are going that way that don’t mean that’s where he’s headed.

AITKIN

My guess is that this single track is just a ruse. It’s too obvious, a lone killer on the run taking the trail leading to Sioux country by himself. I don’t buy it.

BONGA

Indians tend to be real good at the unexpected. And they know we’ve got fixed ideas about them and who they are and they do their best to use it against us. I place my bet on this single track here.

AITKIN

No, I don’t like that single track.

BONGA

Well sir, you pick with ever one you want and dole out the rest. I’m going with this single set of tracks.

AITKIN

I thought you were sticking with me.

BONGA

If I’m going to help Almighty God in keeping you from killing the man that murdered your son then I’m going to follow these tracks and bring him in alive. I give you my word on it.

AITKIN

If you feel that strongly about it, I guess you ought to follow your mind. There’re enough of us to follow all these tracks. Pick your man. On second thought take two.

BONGA

The last thing I need is the company of any of that lot. If you don’t mind sir I’m going to follow this trail alone.

AITKIN

…Alone?

BONGA

It’s just easier that way, quiet, no talking no noise. Besides, what trouble can it be? His tracks are in the snow. I’m just going to walk him down like a deer on the run. …See you back at Leech Lake.

AITKIN

…When?

BONGA

I don’t know. I got to catch him first.

*END OF SCENE*

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG peers from behind a tree looking into the distance*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Ha! It worked. They took the bait. Look at them tramping about every which a way, going in every direction to the four winds. Oh, my brothers will lead them on a merry chase. And if they catch them they will say, “Who is Che-ga-wa-skung?” “We don’t know any Che-ga-wa-skung.” “We heard there was a Che-ga-wa-skung on Lake Superior. Maybe he is there”. Then the white men will turn red and make faces and shout how what stupid liars we Indians are. And then my brothers will swear they are not liars and call the white men great white fathers and chiefs and every other such nonsense. And then one of the white men will say, “These Indians are useless. We must march on!” And my brothers will say, “We will take our great white fathers where they want to go.” And of course by now they don’t know where they want to go. And if they want to go deeper into the country they can’t get there unless an Indian takes them there. And if they are foolish enough to do that my brothers will have scalps. Oh, thank the Great Spirit what a fool a white man is.

*We hear the singing of “Alouette” in the distance*

What is that? …Singing? Who is this walking alone? You’re not following my tracks are you white man, you all alone, all by yourself? What is that song you are singing? French like the voyageurs used to sing. You’re not new to this country are you? Look at the way you swagger. You think a lot of yourself don’t you. Are you singing that song so loud and so terribly so that I know you are after me and hope I’ll be frightened? Take care white man, you have a lot to learn and there is much I can teach you.

*ENTER BONGA*

BONGA

Alouette, gentille alouette,  
Alouette, je te plumerai

…Time for a pipe break. We used to take pipe breaks every hour from paddling the canoes. It was a good habit, a fine routine, rest and relax your muscles before paddling off again. I bet you don’t have a pipe to smoke or any tobacco to put in it. It’s just as well it would only slow you down. You like my singing do you or does it make you nervous? I know you’re up on that hill watching over the lake seeing how your plan worked out. And maybe you see me and thinking maybe not.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You’ll have to move faster than you are to catch me.

BONGA

You move fast and you’ll be easier to track.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You keep taking these pipe breaks the trail will get longer between us.

BONGA

I’ll walk you run and make the trail longer between us. The problem is since I’m following you we’ll be going in the same direction. And I plan on being a distraction. A question you’re always asking yourself. Where is he? How far is he behind me? And in stretching that distance you’re going wear yourself out. And over time, with a little patience that distance will close between us until you finally see me. And then it’ll be too late.

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG sits by a fire rapping his foot with a Muskrat skin*

Now, what have we here? …Ouch. Got your foot caught in a beaver trap. Now, there’s a bit of irony and a touch of bad luck. Walking fast looking over your shoulder, not paying attention to where you’re going. This is bound to make you disparate. Now you know when I see blood on your tracks, I know it’s you.

And what’s this here? …Muskrat hunting too hey. I thought I heard a shot. …pieces of thread from where you cut strips off of your blanket for a lashing so you can wrap the skin around your frozen bloody feet. You’re not doing so good are you?

*BONGA sees the camp fire*

BONGA

My, that’s a big fire you have there. I suppose you want me to know exactly where you are. Is that it? Just to the east of me where the morning sun will be in my eyes. In that forest of birch trees where in that light trees and shadows and a man all look the same. First you’re hunting muskrat and now you’re hunting me, hey? Well, I’ll try not to be a disappointment to you my friend.

*CROSS FADE*

*The dawn rises on THE TRAIL DAY 2*

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG with his rifle is perched behind a tree*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Where are you white man? Are taking one of your pipe breaks again? You are slow as sugar sap oozing out of a maple tree. Come on so I can shoot you and be on my way.

*BONGA comes up behind CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG*

BONGA

Don’t move.

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG turns and startled by BONGA drops his musket*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You’re not a white man.

BONGA

That’s a matter that’s been up for some discussion.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Is that war paint on your face?

BONGA

No, it’s my face.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Oh, you must be the one they call Bonga, the mixed blood Indian Negro sub-trader who works for William Aitkin. You are the black-white man.

BONGA

I am the man who will shoot you if you don’t do exactly as I say. Take that blanket from around your waist and throw it down by that tree. …Now sit. …Put your arms behind you… around the tree.

*BONGA binds his arms behind the tree*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

What now?

BONGA

Now, I’m going to smoke my pipe. I’ve been waiting for it all morning, watching you fix your ambush.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Let me smoke too. …Come on share it with me. …Your Indian mother is of the Pillager band, yes?

BONGA

How do you know that?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

The country is big the talk is big and travels far. That makes me your brother.

BONGA

I am not your brother.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Well, we are kin in a kind of way. Come on smoke a pipe with your brother.

BONGA

There will only be peace between us if you do exactly as I say.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I will, I will. Just give me a smoke will you.

*BONGA puts the pipe in his mouth*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Ah, ah. Good. …Now wave the smoke over my face.

BONGA

Maybe I should untie your hands so you can do it for yourself.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

That would be most brotherly of you my black-white brother. …No hey? …So what happens now?

BONGA

Now, I take you back to Leech Lake.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Leech Lake is a long way from here.

BONGA

Anywhere is a long way from here.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…And after Leech Lake then what?

BONGA

You’ll probably be taken to Fort Snelling for a trial.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

A trial, what is that?

BONGA

Like a council where they will decide your fate.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And only white men will be on this council yes, soldiers and agents? And what will be this fate?

BONGA

I suppose they will probably hang you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Hang me? Why not shoot me, smash me in the head with a hatchet or set me on fire? But hang me? That’s no way for a warrior to die.

BONGA

You killed a man. You broke the law.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Whose law? …Yours? …Mine? …The law of nature? …The law of life? Whose law Bonga? When a white man kills an Indian who hangs him, hey?

BONGA

That has nothing to do with me. I’m only here to take you in.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It has nothing to do with you? Oh, I thought you were standing there before my eyes, but I guess you’re really up there in the clouds. You half-breeds you really have it good don’t you? Some days you can be Indian and some days you are white. And you, you can be black every once in a while. Although I don’t know what good it does you except that people can recognize you without having seen you before. If he’s black, people say, he must be Bonga.

BONGA

I have a brother. His name is Stephen Bonga.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I’m sure no one can tell the difference.

BONGA

We’ve only just met and already you’re starting to annoy me. Your mouth smells as bad as that muskrat skin on your feet. Maybe it will be frozen shut by the time you get to Fort Snelling.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I have no intention of reaching Fort Snelling.

BONGA

We’ll see about that.

FADE OUT/ END OF SCENE

*THE TRAIL DAY 3*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

How much are they paying you to bring me in?

BONGA

As far as I know they’re not paying me anything.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You mean you are doing this for nothing?

BONGA

If someone killed one of your kin, what would you do?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I would seek vengeance.

BONGA

And were you seeking vengeance when you shot Alfred?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Yes.

BONGA

Oh yeah? And what did Alfred do to you?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

He took away my woman.

BONGA

She wasn’t your woman. And she wasn’t Alfred’s woman. She belongs to another man. From what I hear you kept after her even while she didn’t want you to and now you’ve disgraced her.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You half-breeds believe everything the white traders say. And you know why? Because believing them fills your half-breed belly and fills your stores with beaver pelts.

BONGA

Beaver pelts and trade goods is what this country is all about.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…And money and land…our land and changing our very lives.

BONGA

Indians have been trading beaver for hundreds of years. Now, you say it’s changing your life. What does that have to do with shooting Alfred Aitkin? And you say for a woman that’s been with you and her husband too. Most folks would call that kind of woman a whore.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I’ll kill you Bonga! I swear I will kill you.

BONGA

That’s why I’m taking you in, to put a stop to your killing and whore mongering.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It sounds like the missionaries have taken your soul, your spirit. Your ears are wet from the licking of liars. No wonder the whites call you a white man Tell me when they hang me which half of you will witness it, the Indian or the white man? …Or maybe the other one the Negro one who is slave to the white man. I hear that way to the south down where the Mississippi wanders that all your people are slaves. That they use you like Reverend Boutewell uses his cattle and that all your women are whores for white men to use as they wish. Even your children are slaves and all the men are lap dogs and cowards.

*BONGA puts his rifle to CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG’s head*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…I’m sorry. …I shouldn’t have said that. I’ve never been down where the Mississippi goes. What I said are only rumors. I have no way of knowing if they’re true. I only said it because you called my woman a whore. I didn’t mean anything. I’m sorry.

*BONGA withdraws his rifle*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…Well, is it true?

BONGA

Is what true?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

That all the blacks in the south are slaves?

BONGA

Yes, it’s true.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

How did they come to be that way? Was there a war?

BONGA

No, there was no war. They were captured in a place called Africa across the great waters.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And how did you escape?

BONGA

I didn’t escape. I was born here on the frontier just like you. I’ve never been south where the Mississippi goes. I know no more about it than you do.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Then why does it make you angry.

BONGA

It doesn’t make me angry. The only thing that makes me angry is that you won’t shut up.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Now, you’re the liar. You’re separated from your people and your soul is sick. You cannot save them, you cannot free them. You are helpless and it makes you angry. If you were a white man your face would be red.

BONGA

Will you shut up?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It is the Americans that do this. They’ve made slaves of your people and would make slaves of mine. The elders say that the French were never that way or even the British with all their arrogance. They respected our ways and the trade was fair when they had to compete with each other. But the Americans want everything. The lumbermen want to take our trees and we want to live among the trees. They want our land, our bodies our way of life. They are enemies to both your people and mine.

BONGA

First you say I want to make myself whatever I want to be to suit myself, white, black, Indian. And you want to make me what you want me to be to suit yourself. You think if you make your enemy my enemy then maybe I’ll set you free. Well, let me make myself clear this is not going to happen.

*END OF SCENE*

*A CAMP FIRE AT NIGHT*

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG sits bound by the fire*

BONGA

…You hungry?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Yes.

*BONGA puts a strip of dried meat in CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG’s mouth and slices off pieces for him to chew*

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG laughs*

BONGA

What are you laughing about?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Cut nose.

BONGA

Cut nose? What is cut nose?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

One winter on Lake of the Woods a white man wandered into our camp. He was cold, hungry… alone. We didn’t have much to share. We were roasting two rabbits over a fire. While we were waiting for the rabbits to cook we gave him a strip of dried meat to eat. He was so hungry that when he took his knife to cut off a piece he sliced off the tip of his nose.

BONGA

He sliced off the tip of his nose?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It was a big knife. It flew from his face right into the fire.

BONGA

What did he do?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

He picked it out of the fire… and he ate it.

BONGA

Ha!

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

After that we called him Cut Nose. He spent the winter with us trapping for beaver.

BONGA

So this is a white man you didn’t hate.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I don’t hate the white men. I hate the trade. I hate what it has done to us.

BONGA

No one in living memory remembers life before the trade. Whatever existed before are only campfire stories told by old men. What has the trade done to you?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It took away my woman, my life.

BONGA

That’s nonsense. How did the trade take away your woman? She doesn’t even love you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

She loves me I tell you. She only married that man because he worked for the trader. We were pledged to one another. We followed tradition. We had four respected elders to stand for us, to avow for us. I went hunting for an offering to bring to her family. I killed a bear, a bear do you understand me? I fought foxes and wolves to bring the hide and the meat to her father’s lodge. I wanted to show them that I was a good hunter, a good provider. When I came into her father’s lodge Alfred Aitkin’s lackey was already there with his own offering. A bundle of rabbits…Rabbits. I was too late. She had already been promised to him. And she just sat there with her head down. She wouldn’t even look at me. Her father said that the rabbit man would be a better provider because he worked for the trader. He said that the family would get their pick of the trade goods and the best exchange for their pelts. The rabbit man would make them prosperous because of the trade.

BONGA

That’s a bit of bad luck that is. Still it’s a lot fuss over a woman. You could have always found you another.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Have you ever been in love Bonga?

BONGA

I don’t know. …Maybe.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Do you have a wife?

BONGA

No.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Then you can never know. You can never know love for yourself until you love another. Only when you see yourself in that person eyes can you even know yourself. But when it is gone is when you learn to hate yourself. When you take revenge on yourself. You cut your body, you don’t eat you don’t sleep. You look for ways to make yourself suffer more. Do you know why Bonga?

BONGA

Why?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It’s because love cannot live alone. Don’t you know that?

BONGA

I’m not sure that I do.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Then I’m sorry for you Bonga, you are more alone than me.

BONGA

…It looks like this weather is about to change. It’s getting warmer. I hope it doesn’t rain.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Tell me something Bonga.

BONGA

What?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Why do you call Indians, “Indians” and not by our real names, Ojibwe or Anishinaabe or even Chippewa?

BONGA

I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it. Folks know what I mean. I don’t mean any harm by it. It’s just “Indians”.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

But surely you were raised by your Mother’s people.

BONGA

I don’t know if “raised” would be the right word for it. Nobody took any particular interest in me. Indian boys used to tease me and rub my face to see if the war paint would come off they’d say. Love to touch my hair. Said it was like a beaver pelt, called me Beaver Head.

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG laughs*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Beaver Head.

BONGA

It ain’t funny.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

So you don’t like Indians.

BONGA

I didn’t say that. Just as a kid it wasn’t all that much fun, that’s all. It probably would have changed, but I didn’t stay around long enough to find out. I was still just a little, itty, bitty boy when my father sent me off to school in Montreal.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

School in Montreal you’re an educated man.

BONGA

I can read, write, count, cipher, take care of my business, that’s all.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And you can speak in tongues of the French, the English, the Americans and us Indians.

BONGA

I suppose it gets me by all right.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Montreal what is it like that place.

BONGA

Montreal is the biggest, busiest place I’ve ever been. There are storage houses bigger than Fort William filled to the rafters with trade goods and piles of beaver pelts. With ships sailing back and forth across the great waters bigger than that supply ship up on Lake Superior. With hundreds of canoes going out in the springtime up the Ottawa, along the northern rivers through Lake Nipssing into Georgian Bay, Lake Huron to Sault St. Marie, Lake Superior to Grand Portage and beyond.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

The trade…

BONGA

Yes, the trade.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I think you are right.

BONGA

I’m right about what?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It’s getting warmer. It’s going to rain.

*END OF SCENE*

*MORNING AFTER THE RAIN*

BONGA

This warm weather and the rain last night, has turned this gully into a raging rapid. The whole place is filling up with rain water and snow melt. We’ve got to find our way out of this valley or we’ll be trapped.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…We? You mean you not we.

BONGA

Come on. I’m taking you to Leech Lake.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I’m not going to Leech Lake or anywhere with you.

BONGA

Get moving I said.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

What are you going to do shoot me?

BONGA

I will shoot you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Then shoot me. I’d rather be shot than hanged.

BONGA

You’ll have a fair trial. You have a chance.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…Chance? What chance. Locked up in some white man’s darkness and then they hang me. I don’t like that idea. I’ll take my chances here.

BONGA

Come along I said.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And if I don’t what will you do, carry my dead body on your back all the way to Leech Lake. Then do it. Shoot me. Do it! Do it! Do it for all the little Indians boys who rubbed your face and pulled at your hair and called you Beaver Head. Do it! …You can’t do it can you? It is because you’re no killer. I am the killer.

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG rushes BONGA. BONGA falls back and drops his musket. Then he unshoulders the other.*

BONGA

You want to fight me do you? Then come on!

*They rush each other and embrace in hand to hand combat. It is a brutal, vicious, no holds barred affair, with each one in turn getting the best of the other. In a moment CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG falls near the musket. He gets up and aims it at BONGA. Suddenly he tosses the musket at BONGA and leaps down into the rapid waters of the gully.*

BONGA

Che-ga-wa-skung! Che-ga-wa-skung!

*BONGA aims and shoots*

*BLACK OUT*

**BLANKETS**

*CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG sits with his back against a tree freezing and dying*

*ENTER BONGA with their two blankets.*

BONGA

You forgot your blanket.

*He throws the two blankets around CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG and himself and they huddle together to keep warm.*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I am dying Bonga.

BONGA

You’ve got you some body heat now. Keep trying.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I knew you would come. There is no chance of getting away from you. A man can’t even die in peace without you on his heels.

BONGA

I didn’t take you for one to be giving up.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I’m not giving up. I’m surrendering.

BONGA

Then surrender to me.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I don’t see how that will be any different from this.

BONGA

Why did you jump down into that gully?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It seemed like a good idea at the time. You weren’t going to shoot me. Maybe I was looking for a better way to die.

BONGA

You’re not dying, not if I can help it.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I am not afraid. I don’t want to die, but I’m not afraid. I have the good fortune that the moon is shining and I can look out over the forest one last time. I am happy to die amongst the trees.

BONGA

I can’t let you do that.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Why not?

BONGA

I just can’t. Let you die in the cold and the snow? No.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Listen to yourself Bonga. You are taking me to be hanged.

BONGA

You broke the law, an eye for an eye, a life for a life.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Let me die Bonga. Take pity on me. Leave me here and let me die alone.

BONGA

That’s just the cold talking, makes your blood leave your brain to save the heart. I can feel under these blankets you’re getting more damp than wet. These blankets they’ll pull us through.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

To think that my life might be saved by the white man’s Mackinaw to be taken to hang. Better to die here in the cold than bare the insult of a hanging.

BONGA

I won’t let you die, but I have to take you in.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Maybe Aitkin’s father will adopt me to replace his dead son. I will honor him as my adopted father and he will forgive me for killing his son and put down his grief.

BONGA

There isn’t that much forgiveness in Aitkin’s world.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

That was joke.

BONGA

Oh.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

What are you Bonga?

BONGA

I thought we already been over that territory.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I don’t mean you as people see you, the color of your skin, your Indian mother, your black father, your white ways. I mean you. Who you are among all these worlds you stand between.

BONGA

You are a curious fellow Che-ga-wa-skung. You’re asking me questions that I don’t even ask of myself. And I sure enough don’t have any answers for you.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You can choose.

BONGA

If I chose between the three not a one of them would be me. Whatever it is I am I try to get along with everybody.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It sounds like you’re saying you think you don’t have to choose. But you have already chosen. You chose to hunt me and take me to Ft. Snelling to be hanged. You have already chosen. You’ve chosen to be a black-white man.

BONGA

…Enough of this. Come on get up. You’re not working up enough body heat. We got to walk. Maybe we can find us some shelter.

*EXIT*

*END OF SCENE*

*LEECH LAKE 1866*

ASHWINN

And then you took him to Fort Snelling?

BONGA

No, some others took him to Fort Snelling. They strapped him on a dog sled and took him there. I stayed here on Leech Lake because the Indians were saying that if Che-ga-wa-skung was hung they would set fire to my store and break up my canoes. No way to tell if they were in earnest, so I thought it best to stay close to home. …Everything changed around here after I brought him in. People looking at me sideways, calling me a betrayer, even some stealing going on, whispering “black white man” behind my back as if I was guilty of something. I didn’t like it. I didn’t do anything wrong.

ASHWINN

You gave Aitkin your word. He needed you to steady his hand for him to be able to do his duty and keep his soul in place. You worked for him. You had an obligation to him. He asked for your help and you gave him your word.

BONGA

Unless men keep their word, without honor there can be no law. Without his word a man is nothing, just a ghost in the wilderness.

ASHWINN

And Aitkin rewarded you.

BONGA

Yes Aitkin gave me a reward. He gave me two hundred dollars and a license to trade…a chance to work for myself instead of working for him with his know nothing, know it all self. I had my own trading post. And I was determined to make it the best and most productive in the territory. The first thing I did after Aitkin gave me my reward was to buy me a beaver hat and a vested suit. I drank high wine all night until I fell over fast asleep in my bed. It was what my father wanted. What my grandfather wanted. They were the ones who initiated me in a vision quest to rise up to a place in this world where I didn’t have to gravel up roots and go hunting for a living, where I wouldn’t owe nothing to any man.

ASHWINN

So in the end it all worked out for you.

BONGA

Yeah, it all worked out for me in the end I suppose, with me hob knobbing with the high and mighty.

ASHWINN

And that made you an outcaste among your own people.

BONGA

…My own people? You mean the Pillager Band Ojibwe? I don’t know why you would call them my people except that they have to do business with me. It’s probably the same with the whites for all I know. …Yes, I’ve been ostracized, ostracized now as I was back then. First ostracized by the Indians and now ostracized by the whites. Ever since I turned Che-ga-wa-skung in there just hasn’t been any trust, any real trust around here for me. You see Ashwinn to me I was just following the law, keeping my word. And to others I was taking a man to be hanged. And now I find myself in just about the same fix he was in, without a future or a place in this world, just another casualty of the trade. …Ashwinn I can’t be all of these people, white, Indian, and as for the blacks, I don’t know anything about them. I can’t do nothing about the way people see me. All I can do is be me, Gorge Bonga. That’s all I can do.

ASHWINN

My heart aches for the woman.

BONGA

…The woman? What woman? You mean Cha-ga-wa-skung’s lover?

ASHWINN

Yes. She was the one who suffered the most. And she had to suffer in silence. Even in child birth it is a dishonor for a woman to cry out. I believe what Che-ga-wa-skung told you was true, that she did love him. Loved him with all her heart, but she had to make that sacrifice to hold her world together. She married the trader for the sake of her family, for the sake of her people.

BONGA

And is that why you married me, for the sake of your family, for the sake of your people?

ASHWINN

Yes, of course.

BONGA

Oh, I see.

ASHWINN

…You see? What do you see? You see nothing. Sometimes you can be such a foolish man Bonga. You have everything that Che-ga-wa-skung desired, but could not have. You have a woman who shares your bed, your troubles and your joys … your life. …How dare you. I should ask you why you married me. Didn’t you marry me to atone to the people for what you did to Che-ga-wa-skung?

BONAG

No!

ASHWINN

I was a young girl when you married me Bonga, but I was neither a child nor a fool. There is no shame in your intentions in marrying me nor was there any shame in mine. Our marriage is an alliance that holds our worlds together. We have our love to break our falls from the hardness of life. Is this not a true thing that I am telling you Bonga?

BONGA

…Yes Ashwinn, it is a true thing. I wouldn’t want to go it alone at this stage in life. That’s a young man’s game. You know the forest seems to get smaller as you get older. Maybe it’s because it’s more familiar. You know it better. Maybe know it better than you know yourself. It don’t ask for nothing. It don’t care who you are, what you look like or where you come from. It’s a place where you can be yourself like nowhere else. That’s what you are to me Ashwinn. You’re like the forest.

ASHWINN

You must embrace all of yourself George Bonga. This is what your dream is saying.

*END OF SCENE*

***INTERMISSION***

***ACT 2***

*LEECH LAKE 1866*

*BONGA is typing on a type writer*

*ENTER ASHWINN*

ASHWINN

What are you doing?

BONGA

I’m writing a letter to Mr. Bassett. I’m hoping he can help us. …Listen to it, see what you think.

*Dear Respected Sir: I am writing to inform you of the dire events we are experiencing out here on the frontier. The Indians seem a little more fidgety than they were the first part of summer.*

ASHWINN

…Fidgety?

BONGA

*But this I expected all along. It is the character of the Indian when he thinks (real or imagined) that his rights are being encroached upon.*

ASHWINN

…Fidgety.

BONGA

*Many are disaffected by the unfulfilled promises made by the government and there are rumors that Chief Hole in the Day won’t take any annuity money from the hands of the government’s Indian agent Major Clark.*

ASHWINN

That should get his attention alright.

BONGA

*I am sorry to say that I have lost all hope in Agent Major Clark. He is so much under the yoke of the two corrupt traders Ruffee and Aspinwall that it is impossible for him to do justice to the poor Indian who simply wants to live in peace. Given the state of the Indians I fear what the future may bring.*

ASHWINN

We might even get even more fidgety.

BONGA

*I am fully convinced that your charitable heart aches for all of us who are under the tyranny of Agent Clark and the two traders. We are in great need of your council at your earliest opportunity.*

ASHWINN

This is a long letter. Is there more?

BONGA

Yes, there’s more. Will you be quiet and just listen please?

*Respected sir…*

ASHWINN

Oh another “Respected sir” hey. …Alright, I’ll be quiet and listen.

BONGA

*I am also reaching out to you and all others who may have the means to give assistance in the matter of my two sons getting licenses to trade. James at Prairie Lake and Peter at Red Lake. Any advice or opinion you could give in this matter, respected sir, I should certainly be most thankful to you for the trouble it might cause.*

ASHWINN

Here’s hoping that he reads that part twice.

BONGA

*I am hoping that the Great Spirit will so guide our journeys that we may soon one day meet again and have another good camp fire talk. With sentiments of the most sincere respect I remain yours, George Bonga.*

Well, what do think?

ASHWINN

There sure are a lot of “respected sir’s” in there. And James and Peter are not the only ones that need a license. You need one too.

BONGA

I don’t want to sound like some kind of poor orphan or something. Besides he knows our situation. If James and Peter need licenses it stands to reason I need one too.

ASHWINN

I still think you got too many “respected sirs” in there. And what you got in there about Indians being fidgety. We’re not fidgety we’re mad. We’re being cheated and they know it. We’re not imagining that are we?

BONGA

No of course not. But I’d rather him think Indians are getting fidgety rather than getting ready to start a war or something.

ASHWINN

We need help, we need someone to take pity on us, but a letter has a long way to go to make that come to pass.

BONGA

Yes, I know. But I’ve got to do something. I don’t know what else to do. Time is running out.

ASHWINN

I hate the way we have become these days. People these days care less about time and more about money. How can we say something as foolish as “time is running out”? Time has gone on before us, it is here now, and it will go on forever my husband. You are not a match for time George Bonga, but you are a warrior standing here now and I know you will do whatever you have to do to care for your family. That spirit in you is what makes all of us raise to the occasion. It is your strength that holds the answers to all our problems, all of our troubles. Have faith my husband, have faith.

BONGA

Have faith? I’ll have faith alright. Faith is all we got.

BASSET *(OFF STAGE)*

Hello!

BONGA

…Hold on someone’s coming. …Who is that? …Is that you Monsieur Bassett?

*ENTER JOEL BASSETT*

*He has a pile of blankets in his arms piled up to the top of his head*

BASSETT

Yes George it’s me Joel Bassett. Come help me with these blankets will you.

BONGA

You brought my blankets. Thank heaven. Thank you Monsieur Bassett, thank you. …Here let me take some of these from you so I can see your face.

*BONGA takes half of the blankets and we suddenly see BASSETT’s face*

BASSETT

Hello George! Surprised?

BONGA (In French)

Yes, I am surprised. It’s a pleasure to see you Monsieur Bassett.

BASSETT

I wish I could speak French with you George, but I can’t. All I can speak is English and I’m not that good at that. …Ashwinn hello!

ASHWINN

Monsieur Bassett.

BASSETT

Now, you’re doing it too? It may be a French sounding name, but there is no Frenchman here. Good to see you Ashwinn.

ASHWINN

Good to see you Mr. Bassett.

BONGA

Put them down sir, anywhere.

BASSETT

And I brought you your boxes too.

BONGA

You brought my boxes?

ASHWINN

I told you the boxes would come. Didn’t I tell you they would come? Well, don’t just stand there. Go get them Bonga. Go get the boxes.

BASSETT

Oh, I hired a man to help me. He’ll bring them from the wagon. You just relax he’ll be along presently.

*[Through the scene a man enters puts down a heavy box and exits and repeats filling the area of stage with boxes}*

BONGA

Oh, Monsieur Bassett you are a wonder.

BASSETT

And the blankets are these the right ones? Mackinaw two and a half and four points, right?

BONGA

Yes sir, exactly right. Ashwinn bring something so Monsieur Bassett can sit.

ASHWINN

Yes Monsieur Bonga

*ASHWINN EXITS*

BASSETT

You know being new to all of this, being here out on the frontier, I wondered why blankets were such an important trade good, as much as rifles and ammunition. Then it came to me. Of course if you’re living off the land hunting for your sustenance in the cold Minnesota winter you need a good blanket don’t you?

BONGA

That’s a true thing you’re saying sir.

*ENTER ASHWINN with a box for BASSETT to sit*

BONGA

Sit Monsieur Bassett, please sit. Ashwinn, go and get Monsieur Bassett some of your wonderful Maple Sugar Candy. Are you hungry sir?

BASSETT

No, no thank you. Some Maple Sugar Candy would be nice, but I can’t stay long. I was passing through from Crow Wing and I thought I would stop by and bring you your blankets and your goods in the bargain.

BONGA

Thank you sir, your kindness is too great. Ashwinn, go and get Monsieur Bassett some sugar candy.

ASHWINN

Yes Monsieur Bonga…respected sir.

*ASHWINN EXITS*

BONGA

So, what is it that brings you out this way?

BASSETT

I’ve been running all over the country over this annuity business.

BONGA

You mean the payments?

BASSETT

Yes, the payments.

BONGA

I just now wrote you a letter about that very same thing and was just figuring on how to send it to you and out of nowhere here you come.

BASSETT

Well, I can save you the post George and instead of me reading it from afar, you can tell me the contents yourself.

*ASHWINN ENTERS*

ASHWINN

Here you are Mr. Bassett, Maple Sugar Candy.

BASSETT

…Thank you Ashwinn. …This is good…delicious.

ASHWINN

I see the way you are looking at me George Bonga. You have no need for my council now that Monsieur Bassett is here. After all, we Indians we can get fidgety. Excuse me Monsieur Bassett I will go and leave you two respected sirs alone.

*ASHWINN EXITS*

BASSETT

So, tell me George what did you write to me in your letter?

BONGA

Oh it’s a puzzle to put together sir, but it all comes down to Agent Clark.

BASSETT

Major Clark?

BONGA

Yes sir, Agent Major Clark. He refuses to issue anyone a license to trade, except to the two traders Ruffee and Aspinwall.

BASSETT

And that would exclude you too I suppose?

BONGA

Mr. Bassett, I’ve had a trader’s license since William Aitkin first issued me one back in ’38. Major Clark come along here Johnny come lately and it all come to halt. There’s too much money to be made off the Indians’ annuity. The prices are fixed. The rate of exchange is fixed. And they’re fixed all to the good of Clark, Ruffee and Aspinwall.

BASSETT

These are very serious charges George. You’re talking fraud and corruption. And frankly if it is true… and I myself believe that it is… I’m not sure what I can do about it. I’m just an appointed official. I’m just a businessman. I may have some influence, but Clark is appointed too. He’s the chief agent and his appointment goes up the chain of the Department of Indian Affairs all the way to the Government. That’s a steep hill to climb George.

BONGA

I do not doubt that sir. But, something has to be done. The Indians are being cheated and they know it. With the tensions between Indians and whites out here on the frontier I really fear it will bring on another 1862.

BASSETT

…A war?

BONGA

Yes, like the government’s war with the Dakota. What else do men do when they have nothing else to lose? I really believe that the frontier is in peril because of the acts of those three men.

BASSETT

You make the situation sound very dire.

BONGA

I’m not saying it’s going to happen. But any conflict at all will cost the Government dear. A war will cost much more than the cost of fair treatment and at least honoring what’s promised in the treaties and signed into law. It will cost much less than kicking those three scoundrels out of the frontier.

BASSETT

That’s a tall order George. What do you propose to do?

BONGA

Me? …I can’t do anything Mr. Bassett. No one is going to listen to me. I’m trying to get a license myself, for me and my two sons. I can’t go around baring my neck to the wildcat. We have to survive, make a living. I’ve got some idea of the up’s and downs of politics and if I’m reading the wind right the best I can do for myself right now is to keep my mouth shut. All we can do is rely on the good will of men like you sir.

BASSETT

I’m honored and humbled that you regard me in such fashion George. But I’m afraid that the circumstances are a bigger burden than my poor shoulders can bear. I understand your situation more than you might think. You have goods to sell now and a ready market that promises a profit, but without a license to trade you can’t sell them. There can be no worse situation in business.

BONGA

This is a true thing you’re saying sir.

BASSETT

It is because I admire your ideals George that I have to confess that I am somewhat complicit in this business myself.

BONAG

No not you Mr. Bassett?

BASSETT

I happen to own a saw mill. What happens to the lumber industry is important to me. It’s the natural resource for my work and my business, my lively hood, my survival. And therefore I’m interested in ceded Indian lands. Until I took this position I never really thought much more about it than that, until I read the treaties and came to know some of the Indians. Now, I find it difficult, troubling. My parents were Quakers and they always taught me peace and fraternity. …I find myself in a compromising situation George.

BONGA

An Indian once said to me, “The lumber men want to take our trees and we want to live among the trees.” I didn’t take much stock in it at the time. I didn’t take much stock in much of what he said that winter in the snow, but thinking about it now, it was as if he foretold the future. The Indians didn’t get much for the land, the land where your trees grow and get sent to your sawmill and off to the carpenters who build that box filled with goods. And every step of the way there’s a payment. The trees are a bank where nature makes a deposit and the lumber men make withdrawals. The Indians made a bad deal, a deal they couldn’t refuse. They get one payment spread over time into eternity and have to make due. If the lumbermen can get rich off their land which to the Indians is more than trees and soil, it’s their homeland, why do they have to be destitute?

BASSETT

This is an enormous problem you’re puzzling out here George, business, politics morality. How can the two of us sitting on boxes outside your store eating sugar candy and smoking a pipe ever hope to have an impact on such momentous events?

BONGA

I’ve been in this country all my life. I’ve seen many things come and go. I’ve seen fortunes made and fortunes lost. I’ve seen the wilderness when she was a wild emptiness and see her come to be filled up with settlers and farms. See her grow into a territory. I look back and to me that’s how it all got started, with a couple of fellows sitting on boxes, eating sugar candy and smoking their pipes. The work was back breaking. That business used people up. It broke your body down. The common thing that runs through it all, like blood in your veins or the rivers of this country was determination and human will. Then in ’40 the American Fur Company went bankrupt and then that kind of thing didn’t have any value anymore. And business went from beaver to land. Now all you hear is how we are vanishing, the traders, voyagers, trappers and Indians. Got us in paintings and dime novels like romantic epitaphs to be etched on grave stones, it’s a way to forget us, to forget all about us, when we’re the ones that made it all happen in the first place. But we haven’t vanished Mr. Bassett we are still here. And it isn’t charity we’re asking. The deck is stacked. We want a fair shake. And maybe it is a steep hill to climb, but I think that a couple of fellows sitting on boxes smoking their pipes can still do something. There isn’t anything that good, honest men can’t do in this country. And the first order of business is getting rid of those three scoundrels.

BASSETT

No one can doubt your contribution to this country George. The very fact that you’re in this situation is disgraceful. I am in complete agreement with you about Major Clark and the two traders. I expected you would confirm my suspicions. All I can say is that Board of the department of Indian Affairs has been looking into the matter and there are a number of members that share our opinion. They planned a review and I had hoped they would be here in the frontier now and conduct an investigation, but it’s Washington you know. You just never know. It will take time before anything can happen. In the meantime I think we should think on your own present situation. Is there anything you can think of that I can do?

BONGA

Given the powers that be I don’t know what you can do. I’m in a fix. I don’t have a voice. Perhaps if you would endorse my application, and if you should feel so inclined to ask Senator Rice to do so as well. He knows my reputation. And perhaps Senator Ramsey might do it too, although he is not well acquainted with my character, maybe he might do it. I don’t know.

BASSETT

I will write them both immediately. But for now you are entitled to annuity payments aren’t you?

BONGA

Yes, I get my half-breed wages. But there are a lot of goods here. I’m out a lot of money.

BASSETT

Hold fast. Things will work out.

BONGA

I’ll try.

BASSETT

George, you ever think about going into another line of business?

BONGA

Like what?

BASSETT

You could build a lodge here on the Lake and entertain travelers who come to fish and hunt and listen to your stories.

BONGA

Listen to my stories?

BASSETT

You’re a celebrity George. You’re a legend. Your exploits in this country are a matter of general knowledge. Like that story where you did a portage with 800 pounds on your back.

BONGA

It was 700.

BASSETT

And there’s the story where you tracked down a murder suspect, over 7 days and 7 nights in the Minnesota winter. That was the first criminal trial in the territory wasn’t it?

BONGA

It was 5 days and 6 nights.

BASSETT

A translator, a treaty negotiator, you’re well known, well respected. If you had a lodge catered to the right cliental perhaps you can gather some influence for your cause, for the things you want to change.

BONGA

…Hmm.

BASSETT

It’s just a thought. Well, I better get moving. I got a long way to go before dark.

BONGA

…Thank you so much for everything sir.

BASSETT

It’s my pleasure George. I only wish I could do more. I’ll get those endorsements right away and we’ll see what we can do. In the meantime hold fast, stay strong, things will turn out.

BONGA

Yes sir. Thank you.

*BASSETT EXITS*

*The man carrying the boxes puts the last box down and stands facing BONGA*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Don’t you recognize me George Bonga?

BONGA

You!

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Yes, your brother Che-ga-wa-skung is here.

BONGA

And what are you doing here?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I came to see you George Bonga. I came to see you. That white man was looking for an Indian to carry his boxes, your boxes…boxes for George Bonga, he says. So, I took it for a sign and told the white man I would carry these boxes.

BONGA

Aren’t you kind of old to be toting boxes?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Times are hard. …But you… I see you are doing very well for yourself.

BONGA

I’ve got my troubles.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

There are troubles and then there are troubles.

BONGA

And is that what you’re doing here to make trouble? Are you here to seek your vengeance on me, is that it?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

No brother no. As you can see for yourself I was not hanged. What reason do I have to seek vengeance on you? I am poor. I have nothing. I am like a wolf in winter always hungry always on the move. Better you should take pity on me than I should seek vengeance on you.

BONGA

I heard you got away.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

The white man’s own law said they could not hang me.

BONGA

…Got away with murder.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

When I was in that white man’s jail waiting to be hanged all I could think about was you. I would think about what would be the most painful ways to torcher you. Set you on fire. Burn you alive. Strip the skin from your body and hang you from a tree for crows to peck at. Or maybe take a hatchet and chop your body into little pieces. First your fingers and yours toes and then your hands and your feet, your legs, your arms. All I could think of was what terrible things I wished I could do to you. The place they kept me was dark with only a little opening above me where I could see a little piece of the sky. The walls were made of stone and on each stone was the image of your black face. I was thinking I was going mad. I was being haunted by the spirit of George Bonga. It was as if you were still tracking me. They couldn’t send some stupid white man to track me, they had to send you.

BONGA

And now here I am.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And now here you are.

BONGA

Some thirty years later.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It has been many, many moons.

BONGA

…And now what?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

We will see… But first you must explain something to me George Bonga.

BONGA

**…**

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

After Fort Snelling, they took me before a council at Prairie du Chien…the chief?

BONGA

…Judge.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

The judge he asks the council, of only white men, if the half breed Alfred Aitkin was a white man or an Indian. This council they talk for a long time. Finally the council say that Alfred Aitkin was not a white man. He was an Indian. …And the chief?

BONGA

…Judge.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And the judge say Che-ga-wa-skung go away. I thought I was going to hang, to die a death without honor, to be forbidden to enter the spirit world and like magic they tell me to go away. I’m thinking it just must be a good day to be an Indian. So, I go away. I don’t know why they let me go. I just go. …Why did they let me go Bonga?

BONGA

You been thinking on this all these years?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I have no one to ask, but you.

BONGA

Well, they couldn’t try Alfred as a half breed. He had to be one or the other.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Why?

BONGA

Under the law the court had no jurisdiction over Indian on Indian crime. The jury or the council as you want to call them, they decided that they considered Alfred an Indian so by law they had to let you go. If they had decided he was a white man you’d been hanged.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

This is the white man’s law.

BONGA

It’s not just the white man’s law. It’s in the treaties. It’s in all the treaties, a law for whites and a law for Indians.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It is as if they cut Alfred Aitkin in half. Is there no law for Alfred Aitkin?

BONGA

No, I don’t think Alfred is mentioned in the law.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

It is very strange this white man’s law. It makes no sense. The only reason we do it is because it’s their law. Even the treaties are their law. The council is saying to me that the killing of Alfred Aitkin the Indian doesn’t matter. But killing Alfred Aitkin the white man will get you hanged. And for killing Alfred Aitkin the Indian I am freed. It is strange George Bonga and it makes me wonder.

BONGA

Wondering what?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

What would the council do if they had to decide that about you? Is he white, black, Indian?

BONGA

…Damn you Che-ga-wa-skung! Damn you! I always thought that you would come here one day to seek your vengeance with a hatchet or a knife or a pistol or your bare hands even. But no you come with the worse weapon of all you talking me to death with your endless questions about who I am. Well, you want to know who that is, none of your damn business that’s who. You know Che-ga-wa-skung I’ve been having dreams about you too. No, not dreams more like nightmares, like a curse. You question yourself when you get old. You look back on your tracks in summer and see it all covered over with new growth and in winter filled in with fresh snow. Looking over your shoulder wondering to yourself how did I get here, what was it that made me turn down this road? And then you finally see it. That life is the hunter. That’s the one that’s tracking us all down. Whatever quarrel that came between you and me is in the past. It’s gone. We can’t go back. If you want to take your vengeance then come on then. Tracking you down, I was just following the law.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Whose law?

BONGA

THE LAW! There has to be a law.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…Even if it is wrong? I am standing here free and Alfred Aitkin is dead. Is the law and justice all one?

BONGA

There has to be law.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

The law is like the wind it changes. Before the whites came here even before we came here there was already a law… the law of the forest. We try our best to fellow the ways of the forest. But the white men are not like that. They think they own the forest and the forest must follow their law. Among ourselves we would piety such people. Care for them as we would care for anyone who was not well in their mind. But their madness is powerful and they have no generosity. How can we fight them? What weapons do we have to fight this force that speaks to us like a friend and treats us like an enemy? What are we to do Bonga?

BONGA

I don’t know what you’re asking me. Are talking uprising? You’re not talking uprising are you? I hope you’re not talking uprising. There already been some uprising. And every one of them made things even worse than before. It got worse faster. I’m not getting mixed up in any uprising. Doesn’t do Indians any good, doesn’t do me any good. War is not the answer. And I don’t know what is.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You were much in my thoughts during the war between the whites.

BONGA

You mean the Civil War?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I had hoped that they all would kill each other. And I wondered what had become of you.

BONGA

That war didn’t have much to do with me. It didn’t trouble me much except that I’m glad the slaves are free. It just seemed so far away. The only war that concerned me then was the government’s war with the Dakota and with your people in ’62.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

So, you are happy now that your people are free.

BONGA

…Happy? Yes, of course I’m happy. Still, they’re free, but they got a long way to go yet.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You are still the same George Bonga. You still don’t know who you are.

BONGA

**…**

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Have you any whisky?

BONGA

…Whisky? What do you want with whisky?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I want to drink it with you.

BONGA

Whisky got you in trouble before.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Trouble is all that we own Bonga. Didn’t you tell that white man that two fellows sitting on boxes, smoking their pipes and drinking whisky could still do something?

BONGA

I don’t remember the whisky part.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

And tobacco, to let me share your pipe and for the two of us to smoke together would be most generous my brother. Come let’s sit on these boxes, smoke our pipe, drink whisky and I will tell you something.

BONGA

You are rascal Che-ga-wa-skung, a damn rascal.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I do my best.

*BONGA retrieves the whisky and tobacco*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You have many goods in the boxes hey? …And blankets…Mackinaw. We wore blankets like this the last time we saw each other. Me wanting to die for the sake of a life I could no longer live. I am like you in this Bonga. When I look back on that man I cannot tell you who he is. And when it all fell out life wouldn’t let me die. Life wouldn’t let me get away that easy.

*BONGA returns*

BONGA

Well, I don’t know what good all the goods in all these boxes will do me. I can’t sell them.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Yes, I was listening. And I have heard. Many people know. You have no license to trade.

BONGA

I have no license to trade. …Well, let’s have us a toast. …To the trade…no not to the trade…to full bellies and better times.

*BONGA takes a swig from the bottle of whisky and passes it on to CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

…To full bellies and better times. …To be honest with you I have been tracking you Bonga. I have sought you out to seek your help, your pity…your forgiveness…to beg you for your generosity. Only to discover that you are not that much better off than me. You too are poor.

BONGA

If you look close enough it ain’t that hard to see.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I have been thinking that if you were to ask me who I think you are, I would say I think you’re an Indian. Your mother is Indian. I think your heart is Indian. Your face is black. That’s not your fault. You live like a white man. You talk like a white man. That’s not your fault. It’s not bad. It’s good to talk like a white man. Someone has to talk to them. They only know how to talk to each other. That is why the Great Spirit has given you to us. Nowhere in this country can you go where you do not hear talk of George Bonga. How you are an educated man, wood wise, a man of courage, a man of honor, a true warrior for our Indian rights. Must you die old and poor for the sake of a law?

BONGA

Cut nose.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Cut nose?

BONGA

That story you told me about the white trapper that sliced off the tip of his nose. You tell a good story you do. And I’m thinking you’re just as slippery a fellow as you were back then.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I’m touching my nose to you George Bonga. There is no fooling you. So, now I will speak to you true. You have welcomed me. You have given me tobacco and your pipe to share and share your whisky. Now, I must give you something.

BONGA

What could you possibly have to give me hey?

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

You have many boxes of goods and piles of blankets, but you have no license to trade. Now you need not fear. I will trade them for you.

BONGA

You will trade them for me? That’s breaking the law.

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

I knew you would say this. And I will ask you as I have asked you before. Whose law are we breaking? I have been to Prairie du Chien. I have seen the law. One law for Indians, one law for whites, there is even a law for you and sometimes we are just lawless. When all we want to do is live. I will sell the goods. You talk to the white man. We will do business together.

BONGA

I don’t know about doing any business together or breaking any of anybody’s laws. …But a pipe, a good pipe together is a good place to start.

*ASHWINN appears at the cabin door watching BONGA and CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG speak with each other in Anishinaabe.*

*LIGHTS BEGAN TO FADE*

*The following is spoken in Anishinaabe…*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Geget, zagawe’idiyang mii o’ow keyaa ezhi-maajitaayang.

*(Yes, smoking together is a way to start)*

BONGA

Ginitaawichige ganabaj ji-dakonigoosiwang.

*(I suppose you know how to do it so we won’t get arrested)*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Geget gosha ninitaawichige. Daa-wendaginde yo’ow eyaamang akina gegoo J-adaawaageyang.

*(I certainly know how to do it. Our stuff would be cheap so we would sell everything)*

BONGA

Gichi-enagindegin edaawaagewaad adaawewininiwag. Gidaa-chi-minosemin ganabaj.

*(The trader’s stuff is expensive. We might be able to do very well.)*

CHE-GA-WA-SKUNG

Geget sa.

*(Yes, that is definitely so.)*

***BLACK OUT***

***END OF PLAY***