

# CRIMES OF DISRESPECT

by R.B. Young

## Chapter 1

September 2006

*Coyote River First Nation*

Sharing the river is dangerous. Though Pamela Renard knows a J-stroke from a draw or a pry, boulders and fallen pines narrow the water, and rapids buffet her canoe and its twin as if they were elm leaves. Six paddles swirl and splash. The two crews labour to keep their vessels parallel—that's the point of the exercise—but a submerged rock halts Pamela's craft cold. The force jolts her over the bow. She tumbles into cold wet, and pain hits the back of her head like a hammered spike. Screams gurgle from above the silver surface. Some must be coming from her teammates, the rest from spectators along the riverbank.

Hands tug her to the river's edge. As a teacher calls for a paramedic, the back of Pamela's head burns. Sunlight shimmers down the September sky. Chilly gusts makes her shiver. A Coyote River EMS truck arrives, and the two responders wrap her in a blanket. One dons vinyl gloves and gently probes Pamela's scalp. Silently she curses her fear and looks across the riverbank to a farm field. The smell of freshly turned soil calms her.

"Whoa," whispers the bear-like man who'd inspected her wound. He tilts one hand at the younger EMT. At the fingertips, blood coats the vinyl. "But there's no debris in there. So, gauze. Fifteen minutes."

An hour seems to pass before the junior medic releases the pressure on Pamela's scalp and removes the gauze. Wearing a fresh pair of gloves, the bear examines her again.

"Bleeding's pretty much stopped," he says. "We'll get the stretcher and take you to—"

"No, please," Pamela says. "I'm fine. So it's just a scrape. . . . I *have* to be here, it's important."

The medics protest, saying a doctor must examine her, but Pamela pleads again. They relent. She signs a waiver, and they urge her to go to an emergency room if she feels dizzy, confused, or drowsy; or if nausea or a headache develops.

She nods and thanks them but has no intention of leaving. She practiced hard in order to qualify for Coyote River's canoe team. The other two paddlers, both boys, showed their annoyance when she beat them for the *stern* position—the steering seat at a canoe's rear. Mohawk guys are so colonized, she thinks, that they conveniently forget the power of us Haudenosaunee women.

She glances at the members of Woodmore Academy's team. Two of the three are girls. Damn right, she thinks, it's about time.

Standing beside her, Melvin Brown clears his throat. With skin the colour of his surname, he's a wrinkled but fit elder along for the outing. He climbs the gentle slope leading to the farm field and turns to face the assembled high-schoolers. "Everybody, listen up!"

The canoes now lie on a bank of tussock sedge, and as the chatter fades, Melvin kicks one of the hulls. A sewn-on *Deadhead* logo adorns his camouflage jacket's breast pocket. Above it is a patch of the Mohawk Warrior Society's red flag, showing a fighter in profile against a yellow sun. And atop the badges, steel-grey hair juts from under Melvin's frayed baseball cap.

"This mishap," he says, "it ain't so good for Pamela Renard, the pride of Coyote River." The elder winks at her. "And you're all probably wondering why we put these"—he points to the canoes—"side by side in the river and told the teams to *stay* parallel, or try to, as they paddled."

A light prop plane, its engine roaring, passes over the assembly. Melvin pauses until the din subsides.

"Well, folks," he says, "here's my answer to that. The Mohawk are a tribe of the Haudenosaunee people, which means 'people of the longhouses.' The French called us *Iroquois*. We don't take kindly to that name. It means either 'black snakes' or 'killer people'—depending on who you ask. Anyway, a long time ago, in 1613, we made the Two Row Wampum Treaty between us and some Dutch traders. They were moving up the Hudson River into Mohawk territory. Those Dutch wanted a parent-child relationship with us, but we negotiated a treaty based on peace, friendship, and mutual respect between two *independent* nations."

From the satchel on his shoulder, he removes a wide belt three feet long. He holds it out horizontally, rawhide tassels at both ends fluttering in the wind. "And this ceremonial belt showed the idea—two sovereign peoples working as equals."

He runs his weathered fingers along the pebbly surface. "Tiny coloured beads called *wampum*. They're strung together. These two rows in purple here," Melvin taps each one, "represent the two nations, like two canoes sharing a river and never colliding, never interfering in each other's affairs—"

In a strong gust of wind, he loses his grip on one end of the belt, bends down, and recovers it. "I guess that's the Creator saying he don't like me being so long-winded."

To his deadpan look, everyone laughs.

“Anyway, that’s the basics—*only* the basics—of the Two Row Wampum Treaty. Respect and friendship between two sovereign peoples. Now, to be respectful, it helps to be informed. So the reason we’ve set up the Two Row Exchange is to grow knowledge. Right, teachers?” Melvin tips his cap to the instructors standing near him.

“And you Woodmore Academy students,” he says, “if you seen those flags flapping on the barricades when your buses rolled in here today, one of them looks like this.” He raises the wampum belt above his head. “Two purple rows on white. But I’m getting off track, and trotting beside the canoes has tired me out.”

Melvin returns the belt to his satchel. Looking up, he says, “Hey, Pamela, you’re smart. Help me out with the history.” He looks into the crowd and conspiratorially cups one hand beside his mouth. “*I read her essay for the scholarship competition. It rocked!*”

His hand goes down and he eyes Pamela. “So come on, Pam, get up here.”

She starts up the slope and pauses, turns back to the assembled students. A hodgepodge of baseball caps, Tilley hats, tennis visors, and other headwear.

“Wait a second,” says a girl with shoulder-length auburn hair, her skin as light as her buff cowboy hat. She steps forward. Despite the wide brim above her eyes, she’s squinting, her head tilted. “Why fly your two-row flag if you’re going to throw rocks and beat people up? Because that’s what’s happening at the borderline with Ewing. We’ve tried being patient but—”

A Woodmore teacher, tall and blond, sprints to the redhead. His tense smile convinces no one. “Um, that’s going on both ways, isn’t it? On both sides—from both sides, I mean.” The man waves his hands at her in a vague appeal. “Look, Rose, why don’t we all stick to the history topic, OK?”

“Whatever, Mr. Flynn,” Rose says. “But I’m surprised they even let our buses through the blockades today.” She turns and stares at Pamela. She curtsies deeply and extends her upturned right hand. A tight-lipped smile stiffens her face. “Over to you, *Ms. Scholar.*”

Nervous giggling flows through the group.

Who is this bitch? Pamela wonders, anger bubbling in her belly. But wanting the event to succeed, she resolves to stay calm, to simply ignore smirking Rose. She joins Melvin, scans the faces watching at her. The murmurs fade.

“Well,” she says, “the year 1613—”

She halts, her throat dry and palms sweating. Pull yourself together, she thinks, you’re a Mohawk woman! No one messes with us, nothing stops us.

She drags her tongue around the inside of her mouth, coaxes saliva to flow. “Sixteen thirteen. That’s almost four centuries ago. But we Haudenosaunee have always regarded the Two Row Wampum Treaty to be still in effect. Like in 1677, it was the basis for our Covenant Chain Treaty with the British. And again, over a century later, in 1794, it was the foundation for our Treaty of Canandaigua with the United States—”

“With the States?” someone asks. “But you’re in Canada.”

“Not all of us,” Pamela replies. “Most Haudenosaunee are in New York State, but how this reserve came to be in Canada is another story. So, I guess that’s all I had to say.”

Melvin elbows her arm and turns to her. “No, don’t quit now!” he whispers. “More about the Dutch.”

“Oh, right,” Pamela says, wishing Melvin would stop stage-managing. “Ever since 1613, we’ve considered the Netherlands as like an ally. In 1923, we called on Holland for support in a dispute with Canada at the League of Nations. That League was the precursor to the United Nations. Then later, I think it was in . . . 1977?”

The pause is long and the faces in the gathering show their confusion. *How*, she marvels, *can I have forgotten a simple year!* Panic circles over her like a bird of prey.

But Melvin is nodding at her. “That’s right—nineteen seven’y-seven. At the UN.”

“Right. Of course,” Pamela says, mentally hugging Melvin for saving her. “That year we went to the UN and, again backed by the Dutch, asked for the Haudenosaunee passport to be honoured internationally. But only Holland actually does so—accepts our passport.”

Confident now that she’s covered the salient facts, Pamela signals to Melvin.

“Quite a history,” he says. “Ain’t the sunniest one.”

Mr. Flynn, the lanky Woodmore teacher, raises his hand. “If I may add, I read a news article just days ago about some Iroquois—Haudenosaunee, I mean—high school students in Lafayette, New York. They used the Two Row Wampum to convince the school board of their right to wear their Onondaga regalia at their graduation.”

“Now that story’s a little sunnier,” Melvin says. “Thanks, Mr. Flynn, for helping set up this whole thing. Great idea, putting some students in canoes. And, Pamela”—he turns to her, shakes her hand—“you give us some good history. Show your thanks, folks.”

He starts clapping and applause builds, everyone facing Pamela. She glimpses Rose, whose arms hang at her sides, the cowboy hat hiding her eyes.

At the nape of Pamela’s neck, a trickle. She reaches back, feels warm wetness. She looks at her hand. Flinches. From her fingers, blood drips.

## Chapter 2

### *Oakville*

Woodmore Academy betters any other private school in the city, whose average household's net worth ranks among Canada's highest. Pamela learned yesterday of the town's reputation, when her father mentioned it on the one-hour drive from Coyote River.

Her fingers touch the back of her head. The laceration is closed and healing, the bandage gone, and she fights the urge to pick at the scab.

She's sitting amid the cafeteria's hubbub with other upper-school girls, all of them wearing plaid kilts, white blouses, and navy blue neckties. Everyone is chatting, eating lunch. They occupy three long oak tables, one for each floor of Pilkington House. Windows fill one wall, soaking the cafeteria with daylight.

She looks outside. Across a manicured green sits a stone chapel, whose neo-Gothic arches hold stained-glass pictures filled not with Christian saints but with abstract designs. The patterns, where they allude to spirituality at all, suggest only flowers or birds or clouds or converging rays of light. Pamela has heard the school claims to be a multicultural, multifaith institution.

She turns from the windows and eyes Rose Molloy, the same Rose who interrupted—who challenged—elder Melvin at the canoeing exercise a few days ago. Yesterday, as everyone was moving into Pilkington House, Pamela recognized the auburn-red hair and her voice, as Rose gossiped with a couple of other Grade Twelves at one end of the third-floor hallway.

Pamela watches as a male student walks by with his plastic tray and ogles the cleavage peeking out of Rose's unbuttoned shirt. He trips on a chair leg and barely misses spilling his soup onto the tiled floor. While Pamela wouldn't mind if her own breasts were as big as Rose's, she herself would never dress like that. It's cheap. It reveals a lack of self-esteem, of self-respect.

Except for the dining-hall tables' flowery ornamentation, carved into their borders, the room is uniformly contemporary in whites and subtle greys, with a ceiling of square tiles

and aluminum pot lights that would be oppressive if it wasn't so high, two storeys above the floor—an airy minimalist box, simple and severe. The space shares those qualities with half the campus's buildings; the rest were built in the early-1900s Collegiate Gothic style. Pamela researched the school's history. She pays attention to these details.

She *doesn't* know, however, anyone else at Woodmore Academy except her roommate, the elfin Amy Ling. After moving in yesterday, the two of them stayed in their room and talked until midnight.

Amy also notices Rose's bold cleavage choice when she sits next to her, and from across the table Amy gives Pamela a wide-eyed stare. "Hey, Rose," she says, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Did you know Pam is here on a scholarship?"

"Like three days ago, on the rez," Rose says, tilting her head. "Everyone, including me, heard her speak at the canoeing shindig. So, yeah, I know."

"It's just a student exchange," Pamela says. But she thinks, *Pamela Renard, representing all Mohawk youth, everywhere*—well, all Mohawk youth from Coyote River, anyway. On the reserve last summer, Dad babbled on and on to her: *You're one of our best and brightest, and a model to your friends and your little cousins.* Every time he mentioned it, Pamela's chest tightened and her excitement about the exchange shrank. She feared that, though her friends might be jealous, her performance would be pitiful by Woodmore's academic standards.

"It's more than that," Amy says, putting down her fork. "OK, it's technically an exchange, but of how many students? Only two. You had to win a competition to qualify, didn't you? To me, that's a scholarship."

"Barely hear you two over this din," Rose says, but she nods her head, then turns to face Pamela squarely. "If I didn't know otherwise, your wavy bob would've fooled me." She leans forward, squishing her boobs against the table's edge, and motions to the other girls sitting nearby. "I mean, your skin's hardly dusky."

Pamela fiddles with her spoon. She wishes Amy hadn't mentioned the exchange. She wants to fit in with these girls, not have it separate her from them. But Rose's comment about dusky skin . . . Pamela chooses to ignore it and puts down her spoon. "This stew is lukewarm already."

Rose smiles but her eyes are hard. "Tell us more about the Two Row Exchange, Pammy."

"Yeah," says a shorthaired girl beside Rose. "Tell us." A silver ring adorns one nostril, and thumbtack-sized studs glint on her earlobes.

Pamela tries not to stare. "Wait a bit, and I will. In the chapel, I'm giving a speech about the Haldimand Tract."

"Whatever *that* is," Rose says, waving her hand dismissively. "You know, with that light brown hair, you could almost pass as white. Wow, from ten feet or less, I can usually spot trash from the rez."

“It’s my natural colour.” Pamela says the words evenly and strokes her hair, but her gut is plummeting. She just got here and the slurs have started, just as her father warned her. She scrunches her eyes to contain the rage and refuses to look at Rose. She’s sick of being half Mohawk, half white—French Canadian. For four years, in the hallways of Coyote River High School, she heard the taunts of “apple” each time she walked by a competitor for boys, popularity, or grades. Now Rose is insulting her other half. Pamela turns her head and bores into the bigot’s eyes. “Well, I guess you need a pair of glasses.”

A sneer twists Rose’s face. “And to force me to an optometrist, you’re going to threaten me with a bow and arrow?”

On the far side of Rose, the girl with the nose ring sniggers and claps her hands.

Rose bows her head momentarily. “Applause appreciated, Joan.”

Pamela’s heart is bucking like an untamed horse. She takes a deep breath. “How did a Neanderthal like you get accepted to Woodmore Academy?”

Rose shrugs, and, for a second, hurt registers on her face. The belligerent mask returns. “I pity the kid—Jordan Windsor, he’s a nice guy—that Woodmore picked for your snooty student exchange. Poor Jordy, trapped, probably bored to death, on your reserve for a year.” She shakes her head. “Let’s be honest, race isn’t the problem. It’s Coyote River’s land grab. My family lives right beside the rez, and your damn blockades—they’ve cut off access to my favourite riding trails, ones I helped my father to cut.”

“So,” Pamela says, “you’re obviously from Ewing. How’s things in the cultural capital of southwestern Ontario.”

Rose gives her the finger. “And Coyote River’s a metropolis.”

“That’s the *last* thing any rez wants to be.”

“Things in Ewing are just dandy, thanks. Your damn barricades mean there’s a ten-kilometre detour to my parents’ ranch. My dad’s losing money, like a lot of his neighbours. His clients are pissed off, boarding their horses elsewhere, getting their riding lessons elsewhere. If things don’t change soon, we’ll lose the ranch.”

Pamela stares past Rose and through the wall of windows. The brittle corpses of leaves lie broken on a manicured lawn, and along tree-lined footpaths, gusts are stripping the maples, oaks, and chestnuts.

She turns back to Rose. “Think whatever you want, but the barricades aren’t my fault.” And they’re not. Pamela recalls how, at Coyote River High, student council voted for no violence. For a peaceful protest. But the clan mothers must’ve called in the Mohawk Warrior Society, because stones were soon flying and fistfights erupting.

Rose gets up and pushes her palm toward Pamela’s face. “Blah blah blah. Whatever,