The Moon of Letting Go and other stories
by Richard Van Camp

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Storytelling is more than “what happens next,” though this is an important element in
keeping an audience captive. It has been said that storytelling is about the beauty we find,
about the wrongs in the world and about the silliness we encounter. We want storytellers
to make us laugh. We want them to tell tales that help us to understand the wrongs of
society and protest against them, and we want them to create stories that will make us
marvel at the unusual and wonder at the surprises contained in them. The stories in this
collection incorporate all these ingredients.

Richard Van Camp, a Dogrib Dene from Fort Smith, NWT, writes with power. His work covers a wide range of subjects that are prevalent in today’s world, from drugs and sex to violence. The stories are divided into four sections titled Medicine, Teachings, Healing and Love.

Under Healing comes the story “Dogrib Midnight Runners.” Van Camp introduces us to Grant, who is mourning the loss of his friend Justin. Grant recalls how Justin used to streak through the village and decides to pay tribute to his friend by running naked himself. Thus begins a ritual that gradually leads to healing. Soon Grant’s friends, Clarence and Brutus, join him in the midnight adventure. But streaking down the highway is more than a lark. As Grant says early in the story: “I never told the boys about this, but when I seen his eyes, I swear to God they were closed. Justin was running blind . . . with a smile on his face. It was like a smile you see in church from someone who totally believes” (20). Later Grant has own spiritual birth: “Tonight, I wanted to feel it: sweat on my shoulders, full on filled with peace” (29).

The title story appears in the section called Medicine. In it a troubled mother, Celestine, wants to protect her son from the evils of the world. A man regarded by the locals as the devil meets Celestine and her son after a family funeral. Uneasy in his presence, Celestine recalls the abuse she suffered at the hands of her ex-husband. No
longer wanting to be a victim, she agrees to work for the devil. But is he the devil? In a compelling voice that keeps us spellbound, Van Camp weaves a story of magic and power that brings an unexpected medicine for Celestine and her son. As she says in one part of the story, “she’d always called it [full moon] . . . the moon of letting go. She let it go and moved on. She moved on and gave it to her ancestors” (103). What begins as a tale of doubt and sorrow ends with a restoration of the spirit.

The section Teachings includes “Power of Secrets,” about Freddy, who devotes his time to his son after his wife leaves the family. Van Camp compares this story to an ancient one in which a man plays his flute to a porcupine and the animal responds by sitting on the same branch every day and listening to the man’s music. The man allows others in on his secret and what follows brings disappointment. Van Camp is saying here that the keeping of secrets brings a pleasure that is more satisfying than disclosure.

The section Love follows a story called “Wolf Medicine” and a young man waiting patiently for his loved one, who has chosen another, to return to him and the life they will have together. This lyrical passage burns with one man’s passion to create a world of responsible love. He wants to “make medicine for the world . . . to raise a healer of healers and put the world back into ceremony” (175).

Van Camp’s stories encompass the beauty of the heart, injustices against members of an old society, and the follies of humans. They also contain the slyness of drugs, a violence at times raw and staggering, and sex, intoxicating and direct. Van Camp interweaves the newness of the modern world with the old ways and the old medicine and excels at his craft. As a result, the stories are enthralling and uplifting.

They shine like stars on a cold, crisp night.

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.

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