

**THE
MIGHTY
RED**

**A
NOVEL**

**LOUISE
ERDRICH**

THE MIGHTY RED

A NOVEL

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HARPER

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Dedication

*To those who love birds
and defend their place on earth*

Epigraph

The Red River of the North is young. From the sky it looks like a length of string arranged on a flat board in a tight scrawl of twisting loops. The river gathers in the Ottertail and Bois de Sioux rivers and runs north on a slight incline from Wahpeton to Winnipeg. The river is muddy, opaque with sediment and toxic from field runoff. Not a river you'd swim but good to fish, at least at its source. The river is changeable, a slow and sleepy trickle in summer, rampaging like a violent toddler in spring, when it sweeps across the land reflecting the sky like its mother—a vast prehistoric lake. Over millennia, the waters have given the Red River Valley earth its blackness, its life. The river is shallow, it is deep, I grew up there, it is everything.

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Louise Erdrich
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The Night Driver

2008

Crystal

On a mild autumn night in the Red River Valley of North Dakota, Crystal pulled herself up behind the wheel of an International side-dump, steered out of the sugar processing plant, and started her haul. Out in the country the sugar beets from Geist's fields were piled in a massive loaf on the company piling ground. Crystal drove down the highway, turned onto the access road, and got loaded from the pile. She cruised back to the plant, unloaded. Repeated for as many times as fit into a twelve-hour shift.

On night hauls she always packed a certain lunch. Two sandwiches—turkey salami on whole wheat—carrots, apple chips, peanuts, two cookies. She'd attached a segmented canvas tool bag to her lunch cooler. The pockets of the bag were always filled with the same things: phone, multiuse tool, Black Jack gum, Icy Hot roll-on, Tylenol, lip balm. She brought jalapeño meat sticks, her toothbrush, wallet. In her pocket she kept a lucky hat knitted by her daughter. Crystal also wore an olive-wood cross brought back from the Holy Land by Father Flirty. She wasn't much of a Catholic, but like other people who crave order, she was superstitious. Her shift was 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. By the time she left for work, her daughter was at her homework, unless she was waitressing. Crystal got back in time to see her off to school.

At 11 p.m., Crystal ate her first jalapeño stick and used some Icy Hot. She left the plant and was going back out to the country, high beams cutting into strange mats of fog that lifted and fell, when a

brilliant shadow vaulted across the road. Before she could touch the brakes, the animal was snatched away into blackness. It was a mountain lion, the first she'd ever seen. There was the flow of it, her lights glancing off its pelt, the ruthless slope of its head. Crystal rammed her elbow into the side window and slowed down. Driving over the place she'd seen the big cat disappear, Crystal felt a slight electric charge along her jaw. Even in the cab of the heavy truck something had touched her. A twinge of unease. A prophecy. She tried to shake it off. Her daughter, Kismet, and her husband, Martin, were certainly winding down their days at home. Maybe Kismet had made popcorn and Martin had brewed himself a cup of the special bedtime tea he liked. They were safe.

'Tune your thoughts to a better station,' she muttered.

Then her thoughts were broken up as she turned down a gravel road and drove toward the powerful halogen lights out on the piling ground.

On her way back to the plant, it crossed Crystal's mind that the sighting might have to do with the grandmother who'd raised her, Happy Frechette. Happy had lugged whiskey to Fargo to sell during Prohibition. She had traveled on foot and wasted a bottle beaming a mountain lion. Good money! She had fumed about it over seventy years later. Each time she told of her walk it got longer and more eventful. Was sighting the cougar a sign she'd finally died? Avidity and cruelty had kept Happy alive, but nobody could live forever. Although if there was anyone . . .

Crystal reeled in her thoughts, drove up the lift at the beet plant. She put on the hat Kismet had made out of sparkly gold yarn; it was like a warrior helmet. A couple of the guys teased her but she mocked them back, pretending they were jealous. She was still buzzing from the mountain lion, but she didn't say a word about it. The big cat had appeared just for her. The lift rose, until the mercury switch opened the side gate and tipped out thirty-two tons of sugar beets.

By the time Crystal was back on the road, the call-in show she liked to listen to was on.

Tonight, the topic was angels. Are they out there? Are they listening to us? Answer, yes. The host, Al Ringer, was talking to an expert. They were discussing Creatures of Holiness, the Prince of Faces, Tetragrammaton, and the Order of Cherubim. The angel expert said she would break this down. If you watched the heavens, you could ask for help from the Angel President involved in governing the movement of the stars that night. For instance, the configuration of Libra, on display now, was ruled by Zuriel. Was it worth addressing Zuriel? Probably. Although Zuriel was above speech, Zuriel communicated with the Lord of Hosts by signs. Told what was needed, what was wanted, on earth. Zuriel's mute requests might be said to elicit more attention because Zuriel wore special rings that flashed and glittered.

Someone named Boris called in. Boris had been visited by an angel as a child. The angel had awakened him by calling gently from the end of his bed. When he got up, the angel took him outside, taking care to slam the door in order to wake his parents. His parents looked out the window and saw their son in the front yard. Immediately they rushed out. The angel told Boris to run away as fast as he could. His parents chased after Boris. They were nearly down the block when behind them their house exploded.

'The angel saved us,' said the caller.

'That's what angels do,' said the nonplussed expert.

'What did the angel look like?' asked Al.

'Like a seal.'

'A seal.'

'I mean, it was kind of glowy and golden, but yes, a seal.'

'In ancient days a seal was considered a fish,' said the expert.

'You say the seal, or angel, led you down the steps and out into your front yard,' said Al. 'How did that happen? Physically?'

'A hand came out the end of its flipper and the seal-slash-angel sort of floated. It all seemed normal.'

'They do take various forms. I'll be the first to admit I have no special—'

Al cut the expert off. 'Just a minute, here's another call.'

The next call was from a person who was, or considered himself, an angel.

'Why?' asked Al.

'I was chosen. Simple as that.'

'What does our expert have to say?'

'I will try to be gentle about this, but angels are not earthly beings.'

'Neither am I.'

'They exist outside of time.'

'So do I.'

'Angels see the world from every possible dimension.'

'Same here.'

'They have direct encounters with God.'

'Obviously.'

'Well,' said Al, 'it seems that you're an angel. Thank you. Next caller.'

'Hello. I'm the mother of a son. We live on a farm. When my son was real young he climbed up and fell into a grain bin, which most people the grain would suffocate, but not him. He wasn't swallowed down. He said something lifted him up from below. Then later at the zoo he climbed to the top of a chain-link fence and down the other side. It was a tiger fence. The tiger curled itself around him and did nothing. My son's had any number of close calls. Last spring, he and his buddies went out on the snow after a party. They raced around on their snowmobiles. Well, things happened. But he was more or less okay. My question is first, does he have a guardian angel and second, how to say thank you, specifically, to an angel? Oh and third, how do we stop these things from happening?'

Crystal turned up the volume, leaned forward, stared out at the empty highway as she drove.

'Overall question. You want to know what's going on?' said Al.

'Yes, yes that's it,' said the caller.

The expert jumped in, excited.

'Obviously, yes, your son has a guardian angel! And from the gravity of these incidents I would say his guardian angel is very

highly placed, perhaps at God's right hand. These instances are proof that . . .'

The expert went on for a while but by then Crystal had stopped listening. She knew the caller. The voice belonged to Winnie Geist, a member of her book club, whose family land and beet pile she had just turned down an access road to reach. Crystal could even glance across the perfectly flat fields, glistening under the moon like calm black oceans, and see that a light glimmered in a second-floor window of Winnie's house. Everybody knew about the tiger and what had happened after this party Winnie mentioned on the air. But Crystal hadn't known about the grain bin or that there were other miraculous escapes. Al Ringer moved on. Crystal turned off the radio and drove for a while in silence, headlights peacefully cutting radiant holes in the blackness. She'd never liked the kid. Gary. But people had said, the way people do, that he must have a guardian angel. Gary was in her daughter's high school class. In fact, they'd gone on a couple of dates—against Crystal's advice. She couldn't forget that Gary was one of a group of boys who'd tormented Kismet when she was going through her phase as an innocent, hardworking goth. Crystal didn't trust him and she certainly didn't trust his mother. Winnie Geist liked tragic endings, even hard history, and pretended she understood what she called the physics of farming.

Crystal had named her daughter Kismet to attract luck and lightness of heart. But fate was also involved. And the mountain lion was a hungry shadow. Or maybe—she touched the olive-wood cross that hung around her neck and remembered how the light glared off its fur—maybe she had seen a destroying angel. She thought about how another big cat had refused to eat Gary and touched her cross yet again. Crystal didn't know if there was anything serious going on with Kismet and Gary, but she did know that guardian angels only protect their special person. Getting close to someone whose angel was as powerful as Gary's was asking for trouble.