

## The Half-Husky

*Margaret Laurence*

When Peter Chorniuk's wagon clanked slowly into our back yard that September, it never occurred to me that this visit would be different from any other. Peter Chorniuk lived at Galloping Mountain, a hundred miles north of Manawaka, and he was one of the few men from whom it was still possible to buy birch, for the trees were getting scarce. Every autumn he came down to Manawaka and brought a load of birch for our furnace. Birch held the fire better than poplar, but it was expensive and we could afford only the one load, so my grandfather burned a mixture. I watched the man whoa the team and then climb onto the back of the wagon and begin throwing down the cordwood sticks. The powdery white bark was still on and in places had been torn, exposing the pale rust colour of the inner bark. The logs thudded dryly as he flung them down. Later my grandfather and I would have to carry them inside. The plebeian poplar was kept outside, but the birch was stacked in the basement.

I was lying on the roof of the tool-shed, reading. An enormous spruce tree grew beside the shed, and the branches feathered out across the roof, concealing anyone who was perched there. I was fifteen, and getting too old to be climbing on roofs, my mother said.

"Hi, Mr. Chorniuk," I called.

He looked up, and I emerged from the spruce boughs and waved at him. He grinned.

"Hi, Vanessa. Listen, you want a dog, eh?"

"What?" I said. "Has Natasha had pups again?"

"Yeh, that's right," Mr. Chorniuk said. "There's no stopping Natasha. This is her fifth litter. This time she got herself mixed up with a Husky."

"Gee." I was impressed. "The pups are half-Husky? What're they like?"

"Come and see," he beckoned. "I brought one for you."

I slid quickly down from the tool-shed roof onto the fence and then to the ground. The pup was in a cardboard box in the front of the wagon. It was very young and plump, and its fur was short and soft, almost like the down on a chick. It was black, like Natasha, but it had a ruff of white at its throat, and white markings on its head. I picked it up, and it struggled in annoyance, trying to escape, then settled down and sniffed my hands to see if I was friendly.

"Can I really have it?" I asked.

"Sure," Mr. Chorniuk said. "You'll be doing me a favor. What am I going to do with six of them? Everybody up at the mountain's got all the dogs they got any use for. I can't drown them. My wife says I'm crazy. But I'd as soon drown a kid, to tell you the truth. Will your mom let you keep it?"

"Oh sure, *she* will. But —"

"Think *he* won't?" Mr. Chorniuk said, meaning Grandfather Connor. My mother and brother and I had lived in the Brick House with my grandfather ever since the death of my father.

"Well, we'll soon know," I said. "Here he comes now."

Grandfather Connor came striding out of the house. He was in his late eighties, but he walked straight, carrying his bulky body with an energy that was partly physical and partly sheer determination. His splendid condition, for a man of his age, he

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attributed to unceasing toil and good habits. He touched neither tobacco nor snuff, he spurned playing cards, and he based his drinking of only tea on the Almighty's contention that wine was a mocker and strong drink was raging. It was a warm day, the leaves turning a clear lemon yellow on the Manitoba maples and the late afternoon sun lighting up the windows of the Brick House like silver foil, but my grandfather was wearing his grey-heather sweater buttoned up to the neck. His face was set in its accustomed expression of displeasure, but it was still a handsome face — strong heavy features, a beaked nose, eyes a chilled blue like snow-shadows.

"Well, Peter, you've brought the wood." It was his habit to begin conversations with a statement of the obvious, so that nothing except agreement was possible.

"Yep. Here it is."

"How much will it be this time?" Grandfather Connor asked.

Mr. Chorniuk told him the price and my grandfather looked stricken. He had never accepted the fact that he could not buy anything for what he paid forty years ago, so he had the permanent conviction that he was being cheated. He began to argue, and Mr. Chorniuk's face assumed a look of purposeful blankness. Just then my grandfather noticed the dog.

"What's that you've got there, Vanessa?"

"Mr. Chorniuk says I can have it, Grandfather. Can I? I promise I'll look after it myself. It wouldn't be any trouble."

"We don't want no dogs around the place," my grandfather said. "They're messy and they're destructive. You'd only be making work for your mother. You might consider her for a change."

"If she says I can, though?" I persisted.

"There's no *if* about it," he decreed flatly.

"Part Husky, that one," Mr. Chorniuk put in, trying to be helpful. "He'd make a good watch dog. No worry about pups. It's a him."

"Husky!" Grandfather Connor exclaimed. "I wouldn't trust one of them things as far as I could see it. Tear Roddie to bits, more than likely."

My brother Roderick was five and a half and exceptionally fond of animals. I was pointing this out, arguing hotly and passionately and with no more tact than my grandfather himself, when Roddie and my mother came out into the yard. My brother, sizing up the situation rapidly, added his pleas to mine.

"Aw, come on, Grandfather. Please."

"Can I, Mother?" I begged. "I'll look after him. You won't have to do a thing. Cross my heart."

My mother was always torn between her children and a desire not to provoke my grandfather.

"Well, it's all right as far as I'm concerned," she said uncertainly "but —"

What made my grandfather finally and untypically change his mind was the delay involved.

"Take the blamed thing away, then, Vanessa, for mercy's sake, or this wood won't get unloaded before tomorrow morning. But he's only to go in the basement, mind. If I catch him in the rest of the house, you'll have to get rid of him, understand?"

"Yes, yes!" I fled with the pup. My brother followed.

The pup explored the basement, snuffling around the crate of apples on the floor, burrowing behind the sacks of potatoes and turnips, falling over his own infant-clumsy feet in his attempt to scurry in every direction at once. Roddie and I laughed at him, and then I picked him up to try him in his new bed and he nervously wet all over the blanket.

"What're we going to call him, Vanessa?"

I pondered. Then the name came to me.

"Nanuk."

"*Na-nook?* That's not a name."

"It's an Eskimo name, dopey," I said abruptly.

"Is it really?"

"Sure it is." I had no idea whether it was or not. "Anybody knows that."

"You think you're so smart," my brother said, offended.

"What would you suggest, then?" I asked sarcastically.

"Well, I was thinking of Laddie."

"Laddie! What! A corny old name like that?"

Then I became aware that my own voice carried some disturbing echo of my grandfather's.

"Listen, Laddie's okay for a collie or like that," I amended, "but this one's got to have an Eskimo name, on account of his father being a Husky, see?"

"Yeh, maybe so," my brother said. "Here, Nanuk!"

The pup did not even look up. He seemed too young to own any kind of a name.

Harvey Shinwell delivered our papers. He was a heavily built boy of about sixteen, with colourless eyebrows and a pallid mottled face. After school he would go and pick up the papers from the station and deliver them on his old bicycle. He was somebody who had always been around and whom I had never actually seen. Until that winter.

Nanuk had the run of the yard, but the gates were kept closed. The picket fence was high, and the wooden pieces were driven deep into the earth, so Nanuk could neither get over nor tunnel under. I took him out on walks with me but apart from that he stayed in the yard. This did not mean he was too much confined, however, for our yard was nearly an acre. One day I got home from school just as Harvey Shinwell had come to the gate and thrown the *Winnipeg Free Press* onto our front porch. He didn't get back on his bike immediately. He was standing at the gate, and when I approached along the sidewalk I could see what he was doing.

In his hand he held a short pointed stick. He was poking it through the bars of the gate. On the other side was Nanuk, only four months old, but snarling in a way I had never heard before.

He was trying to catch the stick with his teeth, but Harvey withdrew it too quickly. Then Harvey jabbed it in again, and this time it caught Nanuk in the face. He yelped with the pain of it, but he was not driven away. He came back again, trying to get hold of the stick, and once more Harvey with a calm deliberation drove the wooden javelin at the dog.

"What do you think you're doing?" I yelled. "You leave my dog alone, you hear?"

Harvey looked up with a lethargic grin and mounted his bike.

"He tried to bite me," he said. "He's dangerous."

"He is not!" I cried, infuriated. "I saw!"

"Why don't you run and tell your mother, then?" Harvey said, in phony falsetto.

I went inside the yard and knelt in the snow beside Nanuk. He was getting too big for me to lift him. He seemed to have forgotten about the stick. He welcomed me in his usual way, jumping up, taking my wrist gently between his jaws and pretending to bite but holding it so carefully that he never left the faint marks of his teeth.

I forgot about the stick then, also. Nanuk was enough of a problem because of my grandfather. Their paths hardly ever crossed, but this was only due to the organisational abilities of my mother, who was constantly removing the dog to some place where my grandfather wasn't. Sometimes she would complain irritably about this extra responsibility — "If I'd ever realised, Vanessa, how much work this creature would mean, I'd never have agreed —" and so on. Then I would feel wounded and resentful, and could scarcely bear the fact that the trouble the dog caused her was my fault.

"Okay, give him away," I would storm. "See if I care. Have him chloroformed."

"Maybe I will, then, one of these days," my mother would reply stonily, "and it would serve you right for talking like a lunatic and saying things you don't mean."

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Having scared each other more than either of us intended, we would both give in.

"He's really very good," my mother would admit. "And he's company during the day for Roddie."

"Are you sure?" No amount of assurance was ever enough for me. "Are you quite sure you wouldn't rather — "

"Oh yes, of course. It'll be all right, Vanessa. We mustn't worry."

"Yes. Okay," I would say. "We won't, then."

And we would both go our perpetually worrying ways.

Some months later I happened once more to come home just at the moment when Harvey was delivering the paper. This time I saw him from half a block away, and walked along the sidewalk quietly, sticking close to the caragana hedges for concealment. He had half a doughnut in one hand, and in the other a white envelope. He held the doughnut through the iron grille, and when Nanuk came up to the gate, he opened the envelope.

Nanuk screamed. The sound was so sudden and acute that my breath was forced back in upon my lungs. I wondered how many times some kind of tormenting had taken place. I felt the burden of my own neglect. I should have taken it seriously before. I should have watched out for it.

Harvey rode off. When I went to Nanuk and finally calmed him enough to touch him, I found traces of the pepper around his still-closed eyes.

Whenever I tried to work out a plan of counter-attack, my rage would spin me into fantasy — Harvey, fallen into the deepest part of the Wachakwa River, unable to swim, and Nanuk, capable of rescue but waiting for a signal from me. Would I speak or not? Sometimes I let Harvey drown. Sometimes at the last minute I spared him — this was more satisfactory than his death, as it enabled me to feel great-hearted while at the same time enjoying a continuing revenge in the form of Harvey's gibbering remorse. But none of this was much

use except momentarily, and when the flamboyant theatre of my mind grew empty again, I still did not know what to do in reality.

I did not tell my mother. I could not face her look of distracted exhaustion at being presented with something else that she was expected to solve and did not know how any more than I. Also, I could not forget what Harvey had said — “Why don’t you run and tell your mother?” I began hurrying home from school, so I would get there first. I thought he would not do anything if I were there.

Harvey flipped the newspaper neatly onto the front porch. It landed just at my elbow. I was sitting on the top step. Nanuk was at the gate. I called to him, but he did not seem to hear.

Nanuk was eight months old now, and fully grown. He had changed utterly. His black fur had grown and coarsened, losing the downy quality it used to have, but gaining a marvellous sheen. It rippled silkily across the powerful shoulders that showed the Husky strain in him. The white ruff on his throat and chest was like a lion’s plumage. He had a Husky’s up-pointed ears and slanted eyes, and his jaws were wolfish.

He was growling now, a deep low sound. Not merely a warning — an open declaration of enmity. He did not try to get over the gate. He remained at a slight distance, his lips drawn back in the devil’s grin which I had only seen in pictures of other dogs of his blood, never on Nanuk. Harvey glanced at me, and his face puckered into a smile. He knew he was safe on the other side of the fence. Then, with a speed which caught me off guard, he pulled out a slingshot. The stone was fired before I could get down the steps and as far as the gate. It hit Nanuk on the throat, where his fur was thick. It did not damage him much, but it drove him wild. He flung himself against the bars of the gate. Harvey was already on his bicycle and pedalling away.

I grabbed the gate handle. Beside me, Nanuk was in a

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frenzy to get out. He could probably have caught up with the bicycle.

I looked at Nanuk's unrecognisable face, at the fur rising in hackles along the top of his back, at the demented eyes. My hand clenched the gate shut once more. I walked back into the house without looking again at the dog. I went to my room and locked the door. I did not want to see anyone, or talk. I had realised something for the first time. Nanuk had all the muscular force and all the equipment he needed to kill a man. In that second, I had not been sure that he would not do it.

Now I had to tell my mother. She did try, after that, to keep Nanuk inside the house at the time when Harvey delivered the papers. But something was always going wrong. Grandfather Connor let the dog out, claiming that Nanuk was giving the house a foul smell. Or else my mother forgot, and would be apologetic, and this would make me feel worse than if she had said nothing at all.

I tried to get home from school early, but I often forgot and went with my friends to the Regal Café to play the jukebox and drink coffee. On the days when I remembered and put Nanuk safely in the basement, I would watch from the bay window of the living room and see Harvey deposit the paper on the porch. He looked in through the gate, and sometimes he even parked his bike for a moment and waited, to make sure the dog was not there. Then, with an exaggerated shrug, as though he knew he were being observed, he would ride off, his face expressionless.

When I was late, sometimes my brother would report to me.

"Nanuk was out today, Vanessa," He told me one afternoon. "Mum wasn't home. And he wouldn't come when I called him."

"What happened?"

"Harvey — well, he lit a whole bunch of matches all together," my brother said, "and dropped them. I got some

water, after, and put it on Nanuk's head. He wasn't burned much, Vanessa, honestly."

I no longer wove intricate dreams in which I either condemned Harvey or magnanimously spared him. What I felt now was not complicated at all. I wanted to injure him, in any way available.

I asked my mother if we could go to the police and get them to warn Harvey off. But she replied that she did not think it would be considered a crime to tease dogs, and in any event she was nervous about going to the police for any reason whatsoever.

Then, unexpectedly, Harvey played into our hands.

I owned a telescope which had once belonged to a MacLeod ancestor who had been in the Royal Navy. It was brass, and it pulled out to three lengths, the largest segment being encased in dark leather interestingly scratched and scuffed with the marks of who-knows-what sea battles or forays into dangerous waters. The lenses were still in perfect condition, and if you sat up in one of our spruce trees you could see every detail of houses two blocks away. I was too old now to climb trees and spy, but my brother often did. One day I found him waiting for me on the front porch.

"Vanessa —" he blurted, "the telescope's gone."

"If you've lost it, Roddie MacLeod, I'll —"

"I never!" he cried. "I left it on the grass near the gate, just for a minute, while I went in to get my rope so I could climb up. Harvey took it. Honest, Vanessa. I was just coming out the front door when I saw him ride off. And when I looked, the telescope was gone."

"Listen, Roddie, you didn't actually see him pick it up?"

"No, but who else could it have been?"

"Did you look carefully for it?"

"Sure, I did," he said indignantly. "Go ahead — look yourself."

I looked, but the telescope wasn't anywhere on the lawn.

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This time I did not hesitate about telling my mother. This was too good an opportunity to miss. I felt jubilant and excited. I felt like shouting some Highland war-cry, or perhaps whistling *The MacLeod's Praise*. Or quoting some embattled line from Holy Writ. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.

"In a way, it's kind of peculiar," I said to my mother, talking so rapidly she could hardly make out what I was saying. "You know, like getting Al Capone on income-tax evasion instead of murder."

"Stop dramatising everything, Vanessa," my mother said, "and let me think for a minute what would be the best thing to do."

"What's all this?" Grandfather Connor demanded crossly, having been roused from his chair by the tumult of my voice.

My mother told him, and he was in no doubt what to do.

"Get your coat on, Vanessa. We're going over there right now."

I looked at him, stunned. Then I shook my head firmly.

"It's a matter for the police."

"Rubbish," my grandfather snapped, unable to acknowledge any authority except his own. "What could Rufus Nolan do that I can't do? He's a fool of a man anyway."

I had not bargained on this. I was out for blood, but I would have preferred someone else to draw it.

"You go, then," I said sullenly, "I don't want to."

"You'd better go with him, Vanessa," my mother said. "Father wouldn't recognise the telescope. He's never had anything to do with it."

"I don't know where Harvey lives," I stalled.

"I know where he lives," my grandfather said. "It's Ada Shinwell's house, at the North End, right beside the CPR tracks. Vanessa, for the last time, you get your coat on and come along."

I got my coat on and came along. The North End of Manawaka was full of shacks and shanties, unpainted boards,

roofs with half the shingles missing, windows with limp hole-spattered lace curtains or else no curtains at all, chickens milling moronically in yards where the fences had never been lifted when they leaned and the weeds never hacked at or fought down. The cement sidewalks were broken, great chunks heaved up by frost and never repaired, for the Town Council did not pay much attention to this part of town. A few scraggy structures had once been stores but had been deserted when some of the town prospered and moved south, away from the tracks. Now the old signs could still be seen, weathered to peeling pastels, grimy pink that had once shouted crimsonly "Barnes' Grain and Feed", and a mute rotting green that had once boldly been "Thurson's General Store". The windows of these ex-shops were boarded over now, and they were used only as warehouses or roofs over the heads of rodents and tramps.

At the furthest point of the town the CPR station stood, respectably painted in the gloomy maroon colour known as Railway Red, paradoxically neat in the midst of the decrepit buildings around it. Above and beyond the station rose the peaked roofs of the grain elevators, solid and ugly but the closest thing there were to towers here.

I knew Harvey had been brought up by his aunt, his dead mother's sister, but that was all I knew about him. My grandfather went directly to the place. It was a small square frame house with wooden lace along the front porch. At one time it must have been white, but it had not been painted for years. The rust-corroded gate stood open and askew, having apparently once been wrenched off its hinges. In the yard the goldenrod grew, and the tall uncut grass had formed seed-nodules like oats. My grandfather knocked at the door.

"Yes?"

The woman was big and haggard, and her face, wrinkled like elm bark, was spread thickly with a mauvish powder. Her grey hair was snipped short like a man's. She wore a brown

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tweed skirt which looked as though it had never been cleaned throughout a long life, and a tight-fitting and filthy peach-coloured sweater that betrayed her gaunt and plank-flat body.

"Well, if it ain't Mr. Connor," she said sarcastically.

"Where's your boy, Ada?" my grandfather demanded.

"What's he done?" she asked immediately.

"Stole a telescope. I want it back."

The door opened wider.

"Come in," Harvey's aunt said.

The house was not divided into living room and kitchen. There was one large room on the ground floor and it was used for everything. At one end the black woodstove stood, surrounded by pots and pans hanging on nails from the wall. The table was covered with oilcloth, the worn-off pattern showing only feebly. The dishes from breakfast were still there, the grease stiffened on them, the puddles of egg yolk turned to yellow glue. On the cabinet stood a brown crockery basin with a wooden spoon and batter in it — the pansakes for tonight's meal. The house had that acrid sour-milk and ammonia smell that comes from food left lying around and chamber pots full of urine unemptied until they are overflowing.

In the front part of the room stood two armchairs with the plum velour ripped and stained, and a spineless sofa, sagging in the middle, once blue plush and now grimed to a grey calico. On the sofa sat Harvey. His long legs were thrust forward and his head lolled to one side. He looked as though he were pretending, without much acting ability, to be asleep.

His aunt darted in like a giant darning needle. "All right, you. Where is it?"

It seemed strange that she would ask him this question straightaway. She never asked him whether or not he had actually taken it.

Harvey did not reply. He lay there on the sofa, his eyes flickering open, then half closing again. His aunt, with an

explosive quickness that made me jerk in every nerve, snatched the wooden spoon out of the bowl of batter and hit him across the face.

Harvey's eyes opened a little more, but only a little. The amber slits stared at her, but he did not move. He bore it, that she had hit him like that, and in front of other people. He was not a kid any longer. His shoulders and body looked immensely strong. He could have thrust her hand away, or held her wrists. He could have walked out. But he had not done so. Slowly, with a clown's grin, he wiped the batter off his face.

"All right," she said. "I'll give you one chance more, and that's all. After that, you know what."

I never discovered what final card she held. Would she have turned him over to the Mounties, or thrown him out of the house? It did not really matter. Maybe the threat was one left over from childhood, still believed in by both of them, out of habit. Or maybe there was no specific threat at all, only a matter of one will being able to inflict what it chose upon another.

He lumbered to his feet, and in a few minutes he came back to the room. He threw the telescope on the floor, and he gave me a devastatingly scornful look. Then he sat down on the sofa once more.

His aunt picked up the telescope and handed it to my grandfather. Her voice was a whine, but underneath it there was a desolate anger.

"You're not gonna go to the police, are you? Listen, you got no idea how it's been. What was I supposed to do, left with a kid to look after! Who'd have married me? What man would've taken on that? He's never been anything but trouble to me. Who do you think he takes after? Some guy nobody but her ever seen."

"I'm not going to the police," my grandfather said aloofly. Then he went away.

"Did you know her, before?" I asked him, when we were walking home.

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"No," my grandfather replied without interest. "She was nobody a person would know, to speak of. She was just always around town, that's all."

Harvey's pestering of Nanuk stopped, for soon afterwards he quit school, dropped the paper route, and got a job with Yang Min, the elderly Chinese who kept a small café at the North End, where the railway section hands went for coffee.

For Nanuk, the respite came too late. He had become increasingly suspicious of everyone except the family, and anyone who approached the front gate when he was in the yard was met in the same way, with the low warning growl. If they attempted to open the gate, he would stand there, poised and bristling, waiting for their next move. Their next move became predictable. Whoever it happened to be would quietly close the gate and go away. They would then phone my mother. Sometimes Grandfather Connor would answer the phone. They would tell him about Nanuk, and he would rant at my mother for the rest of the day, saying that all Huskies were savage by nature.

"Listen, Vanessa, I want to talk to you," my mother said. "Grandfather knows someone on a farm out by Freehold who's willing to take Nanuk. It would be a much better place for him. He could run around. And on a farm, he wouldn't be so much of a danger."

I knew there was no point in arguing. It had become inevitable. Nanuk was taken away on a morning when I was at school. I did not say goodbye to him. I did not want to. I mourned for him secretly, but after a while I no longer thought about him so very much.

About a year later, the Starlite Café at the North End was robbed. Yang Min, the old man who owned it, was found unconscious on the floor. He had been badly beaten up.

They caught Harvey quite quickly. He had hopped a freight. The Mounties picked him up only two stops beyond Manawaka.

"Apparently he didn't even try to deny it," my mother said. "Not that it would've done him much good. You'd have thought he would have hidden the money, though; wouldn't you?"

What I said then surprised me as much as it did my mother. I had not known I was going to ask this question. I had not known it was there to be asked.

"Mother — what really happened to Nanuk?"

My mother looked shocked and distressed.

"What makes you think —?"

"Never mind," I said. "Just tell me."

Her voice was almost inaudible, and there was a resignation in it, as though she had given up trying to make everything all right.

"The vet took him," she said, "and chloroformed him. Well, what else could I do, Vanessa? He wasn't safe to go free."

Harvey Shinwell got six years. I never saw him again. I don't know where he went when he got out. Back in, I suppose.

I used to see his aunt occasionally on the street. She was considered safe to go free. Once she said hello to me. I did not reply, although I knew that this was probably not fair, either.