

The Amazing Sense of SHAKE

Short Story

Written by Cherie Dimaline

Illustrated by The EagleSpeaker Connection



Cherie Dimaline (Ojibway/Métis) is the writer-in-residence for First Nations House at the University of Toronto. She has spent time working for the government, running a Native Friendship Centre, writing and editing for a major Canadian women's magazine, curating a police museum, and even had a stint as a magician's assistant. Her first book, *Red Rooms*, was published in 2007. Since then, she has travelled the world and written stories that may or may not have to do with the adventures she encountered along the way. Cherie lives in Toronto, Ontario, with her three kids, two dogs, two ferrets, and one blind rat. She collects books, teacups, and tattoos.

Tips

shaking tent: a traditional sacred ceremony practised by many First Nations peoples, which involves invoking spirits to assist and answer questions

Criss Angel: an American magician

simile: a comparison made using the words *like* or *as*

Before

What insight does the title give you into the content of the story? Brainstorm your ideas.

During

As you read, write down questions you have about the story as it develops. Are there any details you would include that were left out?

With great power comes great responsibility.

—Uncle Ben, Spiderman

Before I found my own “gift,” being with my Great Auntie Bernice was the closest I’d ever been to anyone exceptional. But she was less than invincible. To slow her down, all you had to do was cook her baloney extra tough. Then she had to mince it up with a butter knife because she had only gums to chew with after her false teeth were shattered in the bottom of her handbag in the accident. That was what turned her from ordinary

into extraordinary—the accident, not the minced baloney. Ever since then, Auntie Bernice has been considered the traditional one in the family.

The accident happened one Wednesday in the middle of April, two years ago. She had hitched a ride to the bingo hall in the west end with her upstairs neighbour, an old French guy she called Pierre, even though his name was Tony. Pierre was driving a 1989 Cutlass Supreme with rust blooms stitched across the door panels and plastic wrap where the back window should have been. The seatbelt on the front passenger side was malfunctioning so Bernice just knotted the belt across her wide lap. Good thing too, because when they pulled off the main road and into the parking lot at the last minute, the car slid on its bald tires, skidded across the pavement, and smashed into a steel streetlight. Bernice got banged up pretty good, and when she woke up there was a handsome firefighter prying open her door. Pierre, he was nowhere to be found.

Bernice was mad because they wouldn't let her go into the bingo hall, even though she explained to the nice firefighters that, according to the laws of the universe, this would be the luckiest day of her bingo career—after suffering a low, she was sure to have a high. She pouted when they loaded her into the back of the ambulance, refused to give a statement to the police, and sulked when we came to meet her at the hospital.

"Bernice has suffered a good knock to the head," the doctor told us. "She should rest for a few days, and it would be best if someone from the family stayed with her during this time. Bring her in if things change, if she gets confused, or has any more pain."

"Jackie, I want you to stay with me," Auntie Bernice said to me.

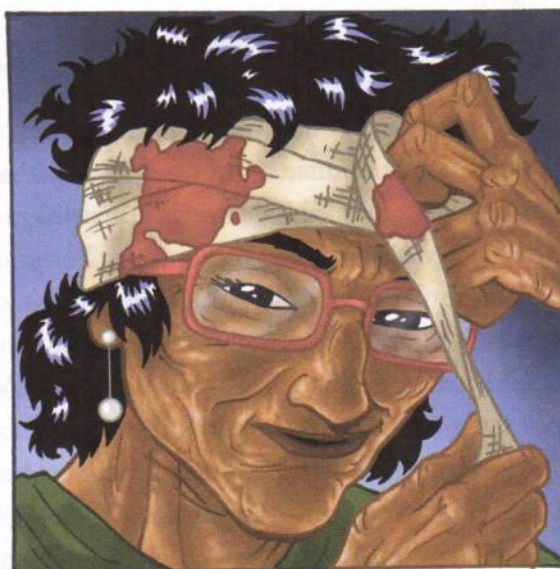
I was surprised, and, to be honest, a little annoyed. Bernice's apartment could be on that reality show about hoarders.

"Let's go home now, dear. I want to rest." She stood up slowly, holding the side of her head where they had wrapped a spongy cotton pad with gauze to stop the bleeding from a small cut above her ear.

I was shocked by her docility, but I should have known better.

"Thank God we escaped," Bernice said, as soon as we were in the car.

"Damn doctors give me the willies." She was already unwrapping the gauze around her head.



"Auntie! What are you doing? Leave that on."

"Shut up now, my girl. This is no time to talk. We can still make the 11:00 bingo session if you step on it." She applied pink lipstick in the side mirror and fluffed out her short, grey perm.

"I refuse to take you to bingo." I turned into the left-hand lane and headed toward her neighbourhood instead. "You are going home to bed."

"I'll just get out as soon as you stop, and take a cab there. And I'll be alone, so no one will know if I'm hurt. The cabbie will probably just rob me and dump my body somewhere down at the lakeshore. But if that's what you want ..."

"FINE! But we're only staying for an hour."

Halfway to the hall, Bernice started humming a pow-wow tune. "Turn up the radio there, this is a good song."

"Auntie, I don't have the radio on." I looked at her, drumming her fingers on her leg and nodding her head to some unheard music. "Maybe we should just get you home after all."

"No, no, I'm fine. Better than fine—I hear the big drum in my head, right in this ear here." She patted the side of her head with dry blood still caked into her curls. "It's a good sign. You'll see."

Auntie won \$5000 that night. I got \$100 for my trouble and she got a great story on top of the dough. And that drum? She still hears it. It's like her entire life has a pow-wow soundtrack. Now everyone in the family goes to Bernice for advice, thinking she has some sort of closer connection to the great mystery and all. She doesn't pretend otherwise, and even started wearing a deer-hide medicine pouch around her neck and talking with her eyes closed like she's reading real important, real Indian things off an internal teleprompter. I know for a fact she carries only bus tokens in that pouch, though.

A week before I found my own gift, I met my cousin Wauby at the coffee shop. I locked my bike outside and found her sitting by the fake fireplace in the back, doing her best to look sophisticated while drinking hot chocolate with an inordinate amount of whipped cream piled on top. I let her prattle on about school for a bit until I cut in.

"Wauby, ever feel like things are, I don't know, evolving, and we're becoming the old version? Like we're not equipped to deal with whatever's coming next?"

She had a suspicious look on her face. "What do you mean, the old version? We're not even twenty yet. There's nothing old about us."

"I mean, what would we do if the world ended right now?"

"I would finish this flippin' hot chocolate in a hurry." She licked at the whipped cream mustache on her upper lip.

"Come on, now. I'm serious! What if suddenly everything was gone, just gone? How would we be able to survive?" I stood up from my seat and grabbed her sleeve. I wasn't sure where it was coming from, but still, out it came, like these were deep thoughts I had been harbouring all along instead of sudden sentiments that were a surprise even to me.

The other patrons turned to look at us as I clutched her in near hysteria, but it didn't faze Wauby. Nothing fazed Wauby.

She looked me in the eye and said, "We're Native. We're good at surviving." Then she tilted her wide chin like she was daring anyone to say otherwise.

"Wauby," I sighed. "You threatened to move to the States when your cable was down for one lousy day."

"That was different." She looked hurt by the accusation. "*Glee* was on."

I cocked an eyebrow.

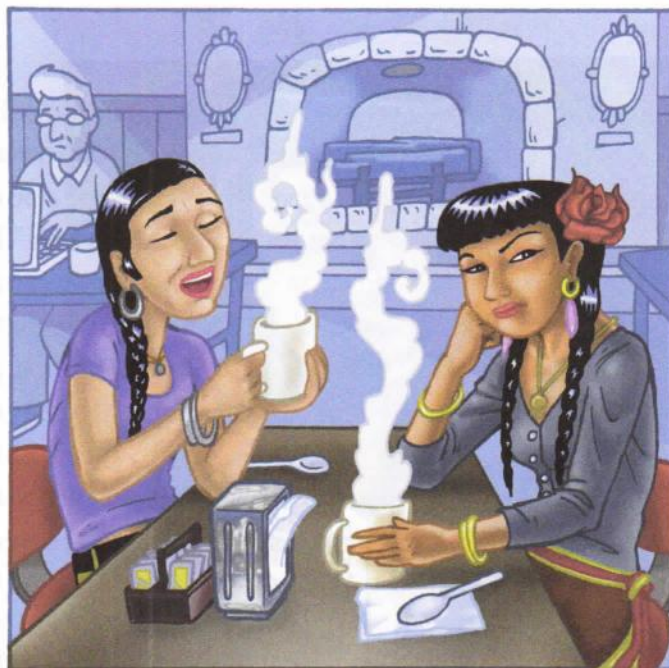
"What?" She frowned. "That's my favourite show!"

By the time I got back to the apartment, the sky was navy blue. I let myself in and turned on the TV for background noise. Mom was working the late shift again and I hated the feeling of an empty house. I flopped down on the couch, threw a blanket over my legs, and flipped through the channels, finally settling on music videos.

The dream seeped into reality like spilled milk pooling over a linoleum floor.

I was on the couch, music videos dancing and flashing, the scratchy pillow Auntie Bernice embroidered still tucked under my head. Suddenly, a plate I had left on the coffee table dropped onto the hardwood floor. As I leaned over the side of the couch to examine the damage, the framed picture from my parents' wedding day jumped off the wall and crashed to the floor, sending shards of glass skittering.

I sat up in a hurry and felt the room move, as if the couch had turned into a mechanical bull. Grey static screamed from the TV screen. From the kitchen I heard tinkling as the cutlery drawer slid open and its contents clattered about.





Then it got bad.

Plaster and dust fell from the ceiling, the walls cracked open like an evil grin, and the pipes in the kitchen burst, sending water rushing over the counter and onto the floor. I crawled toward my bedroom, crunching over glass and strewn papers. I paused over the front section of a newspaper that had fallen off the ottoman and read the headline: "*Destruction & Death! Earthquake Hits Southern Ontario!*" An earthquake! So that's what was going on! I saw flashes of blood and body parts, eyeballs rolling away, and screaming kids.

I looked back down at the paper. Above the headline was a date: June 23, 2010. Tomorrow.

BANG!

My head hit the coffee table as I fell to the floor, and jolted me awake. For a minute, struggling under a tangled blanket, I thought I was still in the middle of the earthquake. In fact, I was halfway out the front door, whimpering and frantic, before I noticed the earth wasn't moving, that the house was still, and that I was acting like a complete lunatic. I went back into the house and to the bathroom. I washed my face, and sat on the edge of the tub trying to catch my breath and calm down. Regaining some composure, I tried tidying up to take my mind off the dream.

But there was this certainty that sat in my gut the next morning, like a heavy meal—a sad, greasy panic that threatened to jump out of my throat at the slightest provocation. I shook in the shower, trembled trying to get dressed, and ended up turning on the talk radio station to listen for news of natural disasters. I couldn't shake the dread. By noon I had convinced myself I was okay enough to be able to leave the house. I went to the one place I felt safe besides my house: the friendship centre.

The basement of the centre was as quiet as a church. There were three tables of heads, some in tight perms, others covered with faded kerchiefs, all bent over little white cards, dabbing at the numbers called from the front of the room by the cafeteria cook.

"B, 34."

"I, 19."

I tiptoed in and took a seat across from Bernice, who didn't acknowledge me until Mary Weaselhead yelled "BINGO," waving her heavy arms above her head.

"Darn Mary Weaselhead. It better be a real bingo this time. Last week she called 'BINGO' after the first four numbers." Auntie Bernice slammed her dabber down and looked at me. "Holy, what's wrong with you? You look pale as a ghost, you."

"Well, I hit my head on the coffee table, maybe that knocked the colour out of me," I said quietly.

"Coffee table? How in the heck did you manage that?"

"Falling off the couch. I had a bad dream."

"Dreams can be messages, you know." She grasped her medicine pouch, and I heard the tokens inside jingle. "We must pay attention to the signs, you know. Tell me about it; maybe I can decode it."

So I told Auntie Bernice the whole story. By the time I was done, most of the players had abandoned their games to listen—even the bingo caller stood silent. Auntie Bernice leaned back in her chair and whispered to Mary Weaselhead, "You know, when she was a baby, her grandpa brought her to a shaking tent ceremony. She could have insight into these things. Then again, it could have affected her too, you know, like mentally." She tapped at her own permed hair while Mary, who hadn't won after all, nodded.

"It was terrible," I said. "Then when I was crawling away, I passed over the newspaper and the headline said 'EARTHQUAKE' and that there had been lots of damage and injuries. And the date on the paper was June 23. That's today."

Now the whole room was quiet, hanging on every word. A few kids from the youth program had stopped in the hallway and leaned in the doorway to listen.

Then I went even further. I couldn't stop myself. I gave voice to the thing that had made me shake, the thought that, if I was going to be truthful, had brought me to the centre in the first place to warn people. "I think it's going to happen. I think we're going to have an earthquake. And I think we need to get ready."

Mary Weaselhead snorted first, then it rippled down the table to the hallway, and the boys standing in the doorway came into the room, laughing and pointing. Skyler Johnston yelled, "Check it out, we got our own seer, here. Hey medicine woman, when are the aliens going to land? Ha ha!"

I felt heat drying up the sweat on my neck. I was so humiliated. Even the old people got in on the joke.

"Oh, Jackie," sweet Mr. Blackstar said. "I had a dream last night that I smelled real bad and was left in the corner of a dark cave. Does that mean a bear is going to eat me in my sleep and then crap me out later? Maybe I should get that extra deadbolt on my apartment door, eh?"

The laughter got louder then. In fact, I saw a few tears running down wrinkled cheeks. I put my hands on the table in front of me and was about to push the chair back to leave when my Auntie beat me to it, standing up taller than she had in a long time.

"That was no dream, Blackstar, you do smell bad, and I've seen your apartment. You'd be better off in a cave." This shut down some of the guffaws, scaring people into silence, afraid they'd be the next to catch it.

"As for the rest of you, how dare you laugh at my niece? Who are you to judge anyone else?" She put a hand on my shoulder. It steadied me and I felt a little safer for it.

"Now who's to say that Jackie didn't see a real earthquake? Yes, yes," she raised her hand to stop anyone from bickering over the absurdity of it. "I understand how crazy that sounds, I'm not simple, me. But who knows, maybe there's one going on in a faraway place—maybe China or Arizona—and she sees that. But who are we to know any better?"

Silence.

"Maybe instead of being jerks we could just believe, because what's better than believing? You all lead such interesting lives that you don't have room for magic no more, eh? You all meeting big movie stars for lunch? You all travelling off on hot air balloons to meet the Wizard of Oz after bingo?"

There were a few chuckles sprinkled throughout the room, but by now the viciousness had been rubbed smooth.

"I didn't think so. Maybe we can't see things that are happening because we're too mean, trying to be all reasonable and normal. Bah! What fun is there in that?"

She waved off the notion of sanity like a gnat.

"I say the hell with being normal. I say, bring on the magic."

Mary Weaselhead clapped, "Hurray!" She quieted down when she saw she was alone. But a few people nodded their heads, and old Mr. Blackstar reached across the table to squeeze my hand.

And then it happened. The growl began in your feet, like a huge bus was driving by at top speed. A tea saucer sitting near the edge of one of the tables toppled onto the floor. Then the chairs started to jump and shimmy with the old people still in them.

When the microphone rolled onto the floor, a sharp bang and a drawn-out whistle echoed through the room. The small cage that held the white bingo balls tipped over, and they spilled off the table and bounced across the floor like eyeballs. Someone's juice box fell on its side and red liquid dripped out, pooling around the table leg. A couple of kids in the hallway held each other and screamed. Then, just as suddenly as it built up, it faded away. The screams died down, and the caller picked up the mike and switched it off.

There were a few more rumbles, like the scraping of so many chair legs, and then nothing. Just nothing.

Incredibly, the first sound was laughter. It was Auntie Bernice. She giggled, slapped her knee, and then leaned across the table, "Hey Blackstar, guess you'd better get that extra lock, eh? Ha ha!"

The story has since become Auntie Bernice's, another tale in the Indian folklore collection she busts out on special occasions, or any old time she's asked. She swears it was the bump on the head I got that knocked the gift loose, just like her. "Not that I recommend banging your noggin for fun, no, in fact, it's a rare thing to begin with. You can't fall on your head and hope to be Criss Angel, there. No, you have to be born with it, like me and Jackie."

It was a small earthquake that hit north of Ottawa. What we felt were just minor tremors—aftershocks, really. And I don't feel different, really. There are no drums or epiphanies, and I certainly haven't turned into some kind of magician. In fact, my particular specialty renders me kind of useless. There's not much need for an earthquake spotter in this part of the world.

The best part is the knowing. Just knowing that at any moment there could be a little piece of the extraordinary caught up in the most ordinary of days.

After

- 1. Reading for Meaning** Identify the most important ideas being presented in this story.
- 2. Critical Literacy** What does the author want the reader to think of Auntie Bernice? Explain, using examples from the story.
- 3. Reading for Meaning** What do you think the author is trying to say about traditional beliefs in a contemporary context?
- 4. Understanding Form and Style** In what ways do you think humour contributes to this short story? How do you think it helps to convey the message of the story?
- 5. Understanding Form and Style** Identify two or three similes that the author uses in this story. Do you think these similes are effective? Explain why or why not.
- 6. Metacognition** What strategies did you use to help you better understand the story?

Beyond

Student Voice The narrator in this story says, "The best part is the knowing. Just knowing that at any moment there could be a little piece of the extraordinary caught up in the most ordinary of days." Can you describe a day where you experienced the extraordinary? Share this experience, or one that you make up, in a creative format.