

Short Story: The Settler

When we signed up for this voyage, we were told that we would be provided with everything necessary to make our establishment in this new land easier. When we embarked for the long crossing, a man at the docks said that he had been here at least three times, and every time was better than the last. We would make it across the ocean faster than we would know it, since the sea was at its calmest at this time of year. We were headed for a magnificent country, with vast expanses of land and sky. You could grow anything on its fertile land. The locals were friendly. And the weather! Couldn't be any better! We would love it, and would feel more at home than we ever did in our land, he said. He said all these things as if he meant them. Maybe he was drunk. Or maybe he just lied to convince us that we had made the right decision in leaving home.

Well, to start, our crossing was horrible. Most of us did not believe that it would be easy, but we were not prepared for the reality of it. At first, the sea was like a mirror, so we moved at a snail's pace, and boredom quickly set in. Some of the men drank too much and a fist fight broke out; it was soon followed by swift punishment on the order of the captain. He was a stern man and did not tolerate unruly conduct aboard his vessel. Some of the food became rancid, but we ate it anyway. We had to. Fortunately, the sea was teeming with fish, so we had a few occasions to dine on fresh cod, which was a treat.

Then our fortunes changed and the sea became a raging monster, with winds howling and waves sweeping over the ship and everything on board. We lost much of our supplies, including some of our food and water. Sails ripped, masts broke, and we were confined to the crowded spaces below deck for our own safety. Passengers and crew members were sick in droves, and as the storm gained strength, we all prayed for a chance to survive the crossing and set eyes upon this new, almost mythical land. Sadly, many unfortunate souls died, and were quickly buried at sea to prevent the further spread of disease, once the storm abated and we could get above deck again.

By then, the ship was in a sorry state, and most of those left did not look much better. It was a few more days before we saw land at last, famished and thirsty as we were. We felt relieved, but too weak to celebrate our arrival. A few more days at sea, and it would have been the end of us.

Some of the townspeople came down to greet us, mostly by curiosity or obligation, depending on their

position. Every new arrival was met the same way; a company man or two to give us directions; a few nuns to take the unmarried girls away as soon as feasible; a few onlookers, mostly men looking for the woman that might become their future wife; some dock hands to work on the ship and help unload the cargo.

The man back at home was right on one account; this place was magnificent. This was an enormous country, vastly unexplored and wild, and with very few people around. The sky was as big as the land it touched, and the horizon stretched out forever. I am afraid that most other information he gave us was a bit off.

Some of the locals were friendly enough, but by the time I had been here two months, I had already been shot at twice. It took me a long time to understand anything they said, and the way they dressed, using animal skins, feathers and beads, left me baffled. I had only seen nobles wear furs before, and they looked nothing like these creatures. I found them strange, and it was hard to know what to make of them. The nuns called them savages.

As for feeling more at home here than in my native village, I was not so sure. Things did not feel much different at first. The governor represented the king, and ran the place as if he wore the crown himself; the nuns and priests ran everything else. The rest of us toiled our days away for a pittance. We had signed contracts with the company to come here and colonise this land, so we were not allowed to sail back home. In any case, few of us would have been willing to take that risk again, after the awful crossing we had just survived. We had nowhere to go, even if we had wanted to, so we had few choices. Not much had changed, to be honest.

Ah, but then, there was the weather. What can I say about the weather? What lies we were told by that man!

At first, it was pleasant enough. We arrived in early summer. The sky was blue, the air was warm, and masses of wildflowers were blooming everywhere. It was more beautiful than anyone could have imagined.

Then summer arrived in full force. Hot, humid, with spectacular thunderstorms at times, it was like nothing I had experienced before. And the insects! Swarms of flies everywhere, and the most horrid of pests, mosquitoes and black flies, and no way to escape them. Mosquitoes are relentless, and bite everything in sight. I must have been more susceptible than most, because I was covered in red bumps of all sizes until the fall. My own mother would not have recognised me. The swelling went away eventually, but not after weeks of torturous itching and scratching. The savages covered themselves in mud to keep the mosquitoes away,

and I have to admit that I tried that method of repelling the hellish little beasts as well. As unappealing a thought as it might appear, it worked and I continue to do it to this day when I am out and about in the woods.

And the black flies. They were ferocious. Tiny as they were, they bit with a vengeance; as if to say that we were on their land, and not at all welcome. They took small chunks of skin away, and left a raw, painful and easily infected sore in its place. Scratching only made it worse, but the urge was impossible to resist.

One way to forget all these troubles was to get to work and to work hard. This was a matter of necessity, as we found out soon enough. When we arrived in port, as sick and tired as we were, we were briefed on the need to get started immediately. There was a tone of urgency in the company man's voice, but we could not quite understand why. There was a lot of talk of the coming winter, the cold and the snow, the wild animals, the need to clear the land and build a house, the need to preserve food. We thought it was a bit early, with it being June and all. It could not be that bad.

It was that and much worse. Most of us, after a while, got to work, in our respective trades and on our own little plots of land, but we did not understand the magnitude of the task at hand and the enormity of what was coming. It was exhausting work, and the pace was slow. Nothing was easy here.

By fall, most of us had been able to cut down a few trees, pull out a few roots, and build a small wooden house that we hoped would see us through to next summer. We had managed to chop some fire wood, for those cooler days when a fire would be required. But it was still so warm, even in October, that most of us newcomers thought that our predecessors had exaggerated a great deal. After all, most of them had only been here a few years. Maybe they had been unlucky with the weather.

And then it happened, our first snow storm. It was stupefying. I had never seen so much snow in my life, let alone in one fall. Entire buildings were buried under thick blankets of white, and people had to shovel their way out of their houses. It was impossible to walk anywhere, unless one was lucky enough to possess snowshoes. The savages had invented these strange things, and made them using tree branches and bear guts. They looked like flat oval baskets, and looked quite difficult to use, but somehow they worked. I decided then and there that I would get a pair, lest I spend the winter buried in my tiny house and starve or freeze to death. The prospect of having to learn to walk on fluffy snow with my legs kept wide open by the strange, broad devices was still better than the alternative.

Surely, we thought, we had seen the worst of it. No such luck. That first winter on the shore of the mighty St-Lawrence River was relentless, and lasted well into the spring. We were living in a frozen wasteland, where all life seemed to come to a full stop. Gloriously sunny days, when the snow sparkled like a field of diamonds, alternated with hellish storms. The only constant was the biting cold, which could freeze skin in a matter of minutes. Beards and moustaches became works of wintery art, as all matter of icicles formed on men's facial hair. Just like that, I could understand the savages' use of animal skins for clothing. A bear's skin was much warmer than any of the rags we wore.

Had it not been for the kindness of our more experienced countrymen, I think that everyone from that early summer arrival would have died that first winter, including me. As it were, only a handful passed away. We were as unprepared as we could be for the harsh reality of the winter here, and none of the supplies we had, the houses we built, the clothes we wore, were adequate for the conditions we faced. It was a horrendous experience, and the loneliest time of my life. I missed home, and everything about it. But I was determined to make a good go at this new life, and to learn from my mistakes.

Over time, I established myself as a carpenter, a trade that was essential to all who came to this land, since everyone's priority was to build a house. I found a wife, which was no small feat in a place where men outnumbered women seven to one on a good day. I purchased some animals and planted a garden, so I was able to feed myself and my family well enough. But most importantly, I became friends with many of the savages who live near our settlement. To my great surprise, I found that they were not savages at all, but kind, caring and resourceful people who respected nature to an extent that none of us could comprehend. It was this deep respect that enabled them to thrive where others struggled. Without them, I would have had a much more difficult time adapting to my new conditions. As it were, I adopted many of their ways, which made my life much easier. No longer savages to me, they became lifelong friends, almost like family.

Now, many years later, I sit here and I reflect on the course of my life. Given the chance, and knowing what I know, would I make the same choice I made as a young man? I think I would. In spite of the difficulties and the dangers, this country is home; I would not trade this huge sky and this magnificent land for anything. I am proud of all I have done here, and grateful for the opportunity to prove myself. None of this would have been possible had I stayed in my native village. I would have lived a poor life, and died young, a broken man after years of servitude to my lord. Here, I am my own man.

What will people think of us five hundred years from now? Will they understand why we left our homes, friends and families, with no hope of going back, for such an unknown and unforgiving world? Will they understand the risks that we took to come here and to plant the roots of future generations? Will they appreciate the sacrifices and hardships that we endured to establish ourselves here?

Maybe they will, maybe they won't. But I do hope that they are thankful for it. For one look at that enormous June sky and that mighty river should be enough to tell them that it was worth it.

