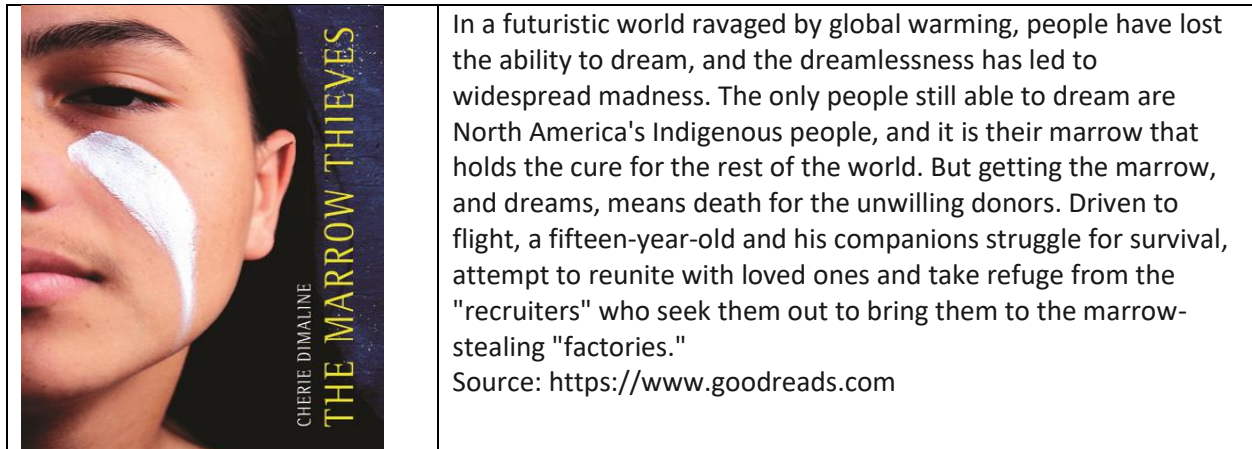


The following excerpt is from...



Cherie Dimaline wins her first Governor General's Literary Award in 2017 with *The Marrow Thieves*. She is an author and editor from the Georgian Bay Métis community whose award-winning fiction has been published and anthologized internationally. In 2014, she was named the Emerging Artist of the Year at the Ontario Premier's Award for Excellence in the Arts, and became the first Aboriginal Writer in Residence for the Toronto Public Library. Cherie Dimaline currently lives in Toronto where she coordinates the annual Indigenous Writers' Gathering.

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#### FRENCHIE'S COMING-TO STORY (Chapter 1)

Mitch was smiling so big his back teeth shone in the soft light of the solar-powered lamp we'd scavenged from someone's shed. "Check it out." He held a bag of Doritos between us — a big bag, too.

"Holy, Mitch! Where'd you get that?" I touched the air-pressurized bag to confirm it was real. My dirty fingers skittered across the shiny surface like skates. It was real. My mouth filled with spit, and a rotten hole in one of my molars yelled its displeasure.

"In the last house back there, hidden on top of the cupboard like Ma used to do when she didn't want us getting into stuff."

Mom had only been gone a few months, so talking about her still stung. My brother popped the bag to cover our hurt. And like cheese-scented fireworks, that loud release of air and processed dust cheered us up.

We were in a tree house somewhere on the outer rim of a small city that had long been closed down like a forgotten convenience store. We were a few hours out from Southern Metropolitan City, which used to be Toronto back when there were still so many cities they each had a unique name instead of a direction. West City, Northeast Metropolis, Southern Township ...

It was a great tree house; some lucky kid must have had a contractor for a father. It was easily two storeys up from the unmown lawn and had a gabled roof with real shingles. We'd been there for three days now, skipping school, hiding out. Before he'd left with the Council and we never saw him again,

Dad had taught us that the best way to hide is to keep moving, but this spring had been damp; it had rained off and on for over a week, and we couldn't resist the dry comfort of the one-room tree house with built-in benches. Besides, we reasoned, it was up high like a sniper hole so we could see if anyone was coming for us.

It probably started with that first pop of air against metallic plastic, no louder than a champagne cork. I imagined the school truancy officers — Recruiters, we called them — coming for us, noses to the wind, sunglasses reflecting the row of houses behind which we were nestled in our wooden dream home. And sure enough, by the time we'd crunched through the first sweet, salty handfuls, they were rounding the house into the backyard.

"Shit."

"What?"

Mitch put the bag down and turned to the window cut into the north wall.

"Francis, you're going to have to listen to me really carefully."

"What?" I knew it was bad. He never called me Francis, no one but Mom ever did, and then only when I was in trouble. I'd been Frenchie since I could remember.

"Listen, now." He turned away from the window to lock eyes with me. "You are going to climb out the back window and onto the roof, as low down as you can get."

"But, Mitch! I can't climb out a window."

"Yes, yes you can, and you will. You're the best damn climber there is. Then when you're on the roof, you're going to grab the pine tree behind us and climb up into it. Stay as close to the trunk as you can. You have to shimmy into the back part, where the shadows are thickest."

"You go first."

"Too late, buddy; they know someone is up here, just not how many someones."

I felt my throat tighten to a pinhole. This is how voices are squeezed to hysterical screeching.

"Mitch, no!"

He turned again, eyes burning with purpose, bordering on anger. "Now. Move it, Francis!"

I couldn't have him mad at me; he was all I had left. I clambered out the window and folded upward to grasp the slats on the roof. I shimmied up, belly to the wood, butt pulled down tight. I lifted my head once, just high enough to look over the small peak in the center, just enough to see the first Recruiter lift a whistle to his mouth, insert it under his sandy moustache, and blow that high-pitched terror tone from our nightmares. Under the roof I heard Mitch start banging the plywood walls, screaming, "Tabernacle! Come get me, devils!"

Fear launched me into the pine. The hairy knots on the sticky trunk scraped my thighs, sweat and skin holding me there. The needles poked into my arms and shoved into my armpits, making me tear up. I pulled my sweaty body towards the other side of the pine, scrapes popping up red and puffy on my thighs and torso. All the while the whistles, two now, blew into the yard.

"Come get me, morons!"

I saw both of the Recruiters now: high-waisted navy shorts, gym socks with red stripes pulled up to their knees above low, mesh-sided sneakers, the kind that make you look fast and professional. Their polo shirts were partially covered with zip-front windbreakers one shade lighter than their shorts. The logo on the left side was unreadable from this distance, but I knew what it said: "Government of Canada: Department of Oneirology." Around their necks, on white cords, hung those silver whistles.

Mitch was carrying on like a madman in the tree house. Yelling while they dragged him down the ladder and onto the grass. I heard a bone snap like a young branch. He yelled when they each grabbed an arm and began pulling. He yelled around the house, into the front yard, and into the van, covering all sounds of a small escape in the trees.

Then the door slid shut.

And an engine clicked on and whirred to life.

And I was alone.

I wanted to let go. I wanted to take my arms off the trunk and fold them to my chest like a mummy, loosen my thighs from their grip, and fall in a backwards swan dive to the bottom. I pulled one hand back and clutched the opposite shoulder. Deep breath. You can do this. The other hand shook as it began to release. The skin of my thighs burned with the extra strain. Soon they too would be unclenched. Deep breath ...