

Chapter 1

NO white person employed by the Hudson Bay Company shall fraternize with the natives [Indians]." This was a rule of the "Bay"—as the company is more commonly known—which I, the daughter of a Cree Indian and a Scotsman, can attest is more often ignored than obeyed on the small island of "jisah-seebee" (Great River) where I was born.

The island was named "jisah-seebee" by the Cree Indians of northern Quebec because it is situated at the mouth of a great, swift river—the Fort George River. Fort George, as the river and the island were named by unimaginative fur traders, is located on the eastern shores of James Bay in northern Quebec, Canada, about eight hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle.

When I was born in 1940, the island was inhabited by approximately twenty white people, seven hundred Cree Indians—who came from their trapping grounds for two months each summer to trade with the Bay—and forty

“white-status” Indians, descendants of Indian women who had married white men.

In Canada, any Indian woman who marries a non-Indian automatically becomes “white” or an “enfranchised” Indian. Her name is struck from the tribal records, and any offspring from the marriage are considered white. On the other hand, any white woman who marries an Indian automatically becomes “Indian”, and her name is added to the tribal records. Any offspring from this marriage are considered Indian.

Our island was five miles long, one mile wide and covered with pine trees. In its centre, five distinct communities clustered together: the Catholic mission, the Coaster village with its huddle of tepees, the Hudson Bay Company compound, the Anglican mission, and the Inlander village. (Coasters are Indians who trap along the coast; Inlanders trap inland.)

Scattered around the fringes of these communities were the tar-paper shacks and one-room log cabins of the permanent residents of the island, those who could no longer trap—the aged and the white-status Indians, who on losing their native status had, consequently, lost their trapping rights—and those who did not need to trap—the few Indians who were lucky enough to get the few menial positions available at the white settlements.

My grandfather was one of the lucky ones. As an employee of the Bay, he did everything from waiting on customers to collecting the garbage. It was through him that my mother acquired the coveted position of the Bay manager’s maid, and it was there that she met my father, one of the company clerks. Falling in love had been simple, but getting married was more difficult.

Without the company’s permission, it would have been impossible; but since my mother had proved herself to be a clean, trustworthy, hard-working girl, the manager and his wife, acting for the main office, gave their consent. My father’s parents, thinking that my mother, whom they had never met, couldn’t be a “dirty savage” if their son was

willing to face the consequences of an inter-racial marriage, also gave their consent.

Only after he had gained the vitally important consent of these two parties did my father approach my maternal grandparents, and they, after holding several pow-wows with the whole family—aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, anyone even remotely connected with the family, which meant practically everyone on the island—consented to the union.

It was during these long, touchy, and occasionally stormy negotiations that I made my untimely presence known and all plans came to a grinding halt. My mother, who had been considering the consequences of such a marriage and who had more or less resigned herself to them, suddenly rejected the proposal when her suspicions of me were confirmed.

Why? Because, according to the over-zealous missionaries who had come to the island to save my people from eternal hell and damnation, *all* white men drank, robbed, raped, murdered, beat their wives and children, had countless extra-marital affairs, and eventually ran off with their mistresses, leaving their poor defenceless wives and children to starve. Only those on the island, those “chosen and sent by God,” could be trusted. This type of preaching was meant to scare the young, curious Indian maidens and to keep the races pure—mainly the white race, I suspect.

My mother, who went to church every day and twice on Sundays, believed all this propaganda and decided that a few months, or possibly, years of happiness would not be worth the years of misery and deprivation that were to follow. While she had been willing to face the risks by herself, she could not subject an innocent baby to such a depraved society.

Her refusal, of course, created a scandal. Nobody could understand why a girl in her condition would turn down any marriage proposal. Even a white man was better than nothing.

When it became a glaring fact that I was on the way, my father was transferred to another store two thousand miles away to save the company further embarrassment. He left

weeping and begging my obstinate mother to reconsider, but she was adamant. It was not the man that she was rejecting, but his society.

Shortly afterwards, he joined the Air Force and was sent overseas. While he was stationed in Europe, I was born and given the grand old Indian name of Janie Margaret Matthews. Everyone, however, called me Geniesh, which means Little Janie.

Before my first birthday, my father was shot down on a bombing mission over Germany. My mother received a letter from him, written a few days before his death, in which he had written that should he survive the war, the first thing he would do upon being discharged would be to return to the island to see his new daughter and marry her, my mother.

She returned to work and left me in the care of my dotting grandparents who had been waiting impatiently for this moment, this second chance at parenthood. The circumstances were not exactly what they had hoped for, but they did not care. Once their own children had reached their teens, they, like most Indian parents, were eager to push them into production so that they could be surrounded by grandchildren in their old age. They were a loving and over-indulgent couple.

My grandmother was a huge moose of a woman who weighed about three hundred pounds. Her face was typically Indian—dark brown, deeply furrowed with wrinkles, with the aquiline nose and high cheek-bones—but her hair was not; it was jet-black all right, but it was also naturally curly. A generous freak of nature had endowed her with this un-Indian and enviable trait, a trait which was inherited by all of her four daughters and quite a number of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but which completely bypassed me.

My grandfather was exactly opposite to my grandmother in size. He was a wizened-up old man, small and thin, probably weighing no more than 130 pounds. His skin was rough and leathery; his hands gnarled and misshapen like the weather-tortured branches of a tree. His brown wrinkled face was topped by a shock of white hair which stood out in all

directions. He also had one non-Indian trait. He had blue eyes! Unlike my grandmother's ancestry—her parents were born before the first white men settled in the area—his was suspect. To me, though, the colour of his eyes was not unusual. I thought all Indian children had blue-eyed grandfathers.

Their backgrounds were also different. She had been raised in the old Indian tradition, learning from an early age all the skills—skinning game, tanning hides, weaving nets, treating various ailments—she needed to become a good wife and mother. She could not speak a word of English because she had never gone to school. She had been too old when the first regular day school was started in 1907. The school was mostly for religious instruction and the learning of Cree syllabics, however. Only the names of the days, months, and numbers were taught in English. Arithmetic—only the basics of addition and multiplication—was added to the curriculum about 1928. Even when the first boarding school opened in 1933—when my mother was thirteen—the half-day sessions were still mostly on religion.

My grandfather, however, spoke English well. He had learned it in his youth, which was spent guiding the skippers of trading schooners and steamers through the unfamiliar and ever-changing waters of James and Hudsons Bays, and acting as interpreter for the traders as they bartered with flour, tea, sugar, blankets, and guns for the furs of the Indians.

In the mixture of English and Cree that he always used when speaking to me, he would spend hours, whittling as he did so, telling me about the things he had seen in his travels—strange instruments which carried your voice for miles, vehicles which did not need dogs to pull them; subjects much too alien to me to be believable.

With these eager, loving grandparents to raise and spoil me unmercifully, my mother was once more urged to settle down to the serious business of finding a husband. An unwed mother was easily forgiven, but a spinster, one who was nearing the age of twenty-one and one whose friends had all married and were raising children, was a disgrace to her family forever. So, all the daring and willing braves of the

tribe were brought forth before my mother; she, being in no rush to get married, rejected them one by one. The gentle urgings of concerned relatives and friends became more and more emphatic until my reluctant mother was made to see the error of her ways, and she was married at the unheard-of age of twenty-one.

She married a white-status Indian boy from another village, one whose parents had been more insistent than most, and in so doing she automatically became white. My status, however, did not change; I was still a native.

In the summer of 1944, when I was three, the newlyweds left the island so that my stepfather could return to his job in Moosonee, Ontario. I stayed behind with my grandparents. Being young, and having lived with them anyway all my life, I adjusted rapidly to this new arrangement. Having a mother in another village was like having Christmas every month as each plane that arrived brought parcels of clothing, toys, and candy for me, much to my great-grandmother's dismay.

My great-grandmother was about eighty, but she still spent her winters trapping in the bush, returning only for the summer months to live with us. I loved listening to her stories in the evenings as we squatted on the aromatic pine-covered tepee floor. Each spring we moved from our one-room cabin to our summer home by the seashore, a huge tepee only a few feet from our cabin. The extra space was needed to accommodate the numerous relatives who had returned from their trapping grounds.

My great-grandmother constantly told me how spoiled I was. When she was young, she said, she never had candies and chocolates. She had been ten when her parents made their first visit to the island, shortly after the first clergyman settled there in 1852. She told me their first gift upon arrival was a bag of flour from the other Indians, but after trying to eat it raw, her parents had decided it wasn't much of a gift. One of the other Indians showed them how to mix it with goose grease and water and then cook it on a stick over the fire. This early version of bannock had been so delicious that she and her parents, in spite of the Indians' warnings, had

eaten it all while it was still hot. That night they suffered terribly from violent cramps, their stomachs distended and hard as rocks. Apparently, it took some time before they could eat it without any ill effects.

She told me also of how the early missionaries, after proving their superiority by making good their threats of strange illnesses—smallpox, TB, etc.—and death if the Indians did not accept the white man's God, had gradually converted everyone to Christianity. (Some of the Indians had been ready for conversion by the time the clergy arrived. The managers of the Hudson Bay posts had acted as missionaries when they had nothing else to do.) Upon conversion, the Indians had been christened with biblical names to ensure their entry into heaven. She blamed all illnesses, especially mine, on lack of faith.

Actually I was a very healthy child. I had to be for self-preservation. When I was ill, my doting grandmother always took the precaution of dosing me with her own home-made remedies after I had been treated by the nurse. It was the dreaded combination of the white man's blunt hypodermics and marble-sized pills and my grandmother's sinus-clearing, eye-irritating, and throat-searing remedies which forced me to keep many of my ailments to myself.

I was not always successful, however. I vividly remember waking up one sunny morning with every part of my body aching and my throat feeling as if I had swallowed a bottle of lye. I bounced out of bed as sprightly as I could, but my observant grandmother felt my burning forehead and gently pushed me back under the goose-down comforter. Then I heard her yell the dreaded words, "ndo-wabin mah ndi-queensquogh," to some child outside.

The nurse wasted no time on preliminaries, but thrust a thermometer in my mouth as soon as she entered. My grandmother was gesticulating wildly, clutching at her throat and pointing at mine. The nurse nodded and smiled at her. She took the thermometer out of my mouth and shook her head sadly. She came at me with a flashlight and a tongue depressor, stuck her tongue out and said, "Aaah."

I shook my head violently and clenched my teeth. My grandmother said sweetly, “wabtee mah. dahbah jig-ahk-heok.”

I could not believe that it would not hurt. My grandmother had threatened me with the nurse much too often. I shook my head more violently.

“wabtee! yahgaw jig-oot-dumhoodin!” she said, a little less sweetly, but since she had hit me only twice in my life—once for using her favourite pipe to blow bubbles, and once for squeezing the chicken-pox pustules on a friend of mine—I knew she was bluffing.

Letting out a war whoop, I jumped out of bed and raced past them across the room. I made a dash for the door and darted outside around to the back of the cabin. I glanced back to see the nurse, clutching her flashlight and tongue depressor in one hand and hiking up her tight skirt with the other, breathing down my neck. My grandmother was nowhere in sight. I whizzed around the corner of the cabin hoping to lose them in the dense bushes behind the outhouse.

Suddenly, a fat brown hand grabbed me from the open window and jerked me back against the cabin. My sneaky grandmother, who had often chased me all over the island to force some of her home-remedies down my throat, had anticipated my usual escape route. She yanked me inside, muttering about all the terrible things she was going to do to me as soon as the nurse left, as I kicked and screamed. She threw me on the bed, and before I could jump up, she plunked all three hundred pounds of herself on my stomach.

The air exploded from my bursting lungs, and as I opened my mouth to take a breath, the nurse, who had come racing inside, laughing, rammed her tongue depressor down my throat. Again she shook her head sadly. She pulled out a monstrous hypodermic from her black bag and proceeded to fill it with white liquid right in front of me. My grandmother shifted her weight, rolled me over slightly, and the nurse jabbed the blunt needle into my rigid backside. Only after the nurse had yanked the needle out did my grandmother let me go.

The nurse, still laughing, reached into her bag and pulled out a container of pills which she handed to my beaming grandmother. They walked to the door, laughing and nodding, and shook hands.

By then my lungs were fully inflated once more, and I started shrieking. My grandmother put her arms around me and rocked me gently, telling me what a horrible person the nurse was and how much better I would feel as soon as she heated up some goose-grease and brewed one of her own cures for me.

She rubbed my throat, back, and front with warm goose-grease and forced a few spoonfuls down my throat for good measure. The vile-tasting concoction which she had brewed was also forced down my throat by squeezing my nostrils shut until I had drunk every drop.

I lay in bed for several days, pulling the chinking from between the logs to pass the time, smelling like a half-decayed body while the penicillin and my grandmother's obnoxious brews and salves did their work. Sheer will-power and a deep sense of self-preservation, I believe, cured me more than either the white man's medicine or my grandmother's.

My grandmother had a cure for everything—sips of warm goose-grease for coughs; goose or bear grease, sometimes rancid, rubbed on the chest and back for colds; weak tea or mother's milk for snow blindness; black bear bile for liniment; beaver castors for poultices, the oil from the castors for sores and rashes; liquid from boiled and strained beaver castors to prevent hemorrhaging after childbirth; and brews from certain plants for various aches and pains.

Sometimes I questioned her cures because all they did was substitute one form of pain or discomfort for another. For a headache, she tied a piece of cloth or a bandanna tightly around my head. All that was missing was the feather. On our island, an Indian wearing a headband was not necessarily reverting to the old ways; he could simply be trying to get rid of a headache.

Another of my grandmother's questionable remedies was

wrapping beaver or muskrat fur around a sore or an ache. When the ache started to itch, she considered the cure effective.

Summer was the time for gathering medicinal herbs and my grandfather's clover-like tobacco, which he dried and saved for the times the Bay ran out of regular tobacco. This was done on fishing or berry-picking trips. My grandparents always took me along but invariably rejected my contributions: too many flowers, not enough flowers; leaves too dull, leaves too shiny; plant too big, plant not big enough.

The only thing I ever learned to recognize was a spicy shrub which when brewed with tea was my grandmother's favourite drink. If brewed for a short period, the tea is slightly spicy and not unpleasant, but she always brewed it until it was strong and pungent. Then she would take a sip, smack her lips appreciatively, and say, "ahk mac tea!" I preferred the store-bought variety myself.

This brew was also taken for upset stomachs, headaches, and coughs. My grandmother, who believed strongly in taking every conceivable precaution, insisted I drink her gut-dissolvent tea each time she brewed it. I shuddered whenever I saw her taking out her precious leaves and throwing them into the teapot.

"min-gaw oo," she'd say when the brew had cooled down enough. "nastahbaw jig-weej-heegune."

When I complained that it did not make me strong and healthy, that I suffered violent cramps, a throbbing headache, and violent coughing fits from the bitter tonic, she would urge me to drink more of it. She told me I got this reaction because I did not drink enough of it, and I argued that I would probably die if I drank more than I did. She would insist, invariably adding, "wasa! mingawshj oo. oowhan jahminheesk gahdigh-anah?"

Not wishing to be responsible for her early demise, I would give in to her unreasonable demands, whining and complaining all the while.

"wasa! oowah-eejanhee naspit-what?" she constantly wondered, but I knew the answer. It was my white-tainted blood that made me so stubborn, so curious, so pesky, so

contrary—all the traits a good, obedient, and pliant little Indian was not supposed to have. I had heard people say it often enough. It was never explained to me why full-blooded Indian children behaved exactly as I did.