

Chapter 2

IT was dark before the tide was high enough for the captain to negotiate the river's sand-bars, and I, having waited impatiently all afternoon, hopped around excitedly while the supply barge was anchored and secured firmly to the anchor posts along the river bank. Two dark figures, each of them carrying a bundle, emerged from the barge and walked slowly up the dock. Suddenly feeling extremely shy and speechless, I wrapped myself in the voluminous folds of my grandmother's skirt and watched as the strange woman from the barge handed her small white bundle to my grandmother. The stranger knelt down, grabbed me, and smothered me with kisses. I stood rigidly, unresponsive and frightened, while the woman, tears streaming down her cheeks, hugged and kissed me.

"jig-ahwee oo," sniffled my grandmother, but I did not believe that the affectionate woman was my mother. I had never seen her before. "dan-eeteech ah?" my grandmother wondered, unable to understand my sudden reserve.

I was bewildered. Everybody was crying, sniffing, laughing, hugging, and kissing at the same time, reminding me of the big family reunions every spring when the trappers returned from the bush. Even my stoic grandfather was crying.

Then the strange man with my mother came up to me. "ah-wah Geniesh?" he asked no one in particular. "Of course it's me," I thought indignantly. He gave me a quick peck on each cheek and walked away. It was my stepfather.

The adults laughed and cried all the way back to the tepee. As soon as we were inside, my grandmother eagerly unwrapped the bundle and pulled out a squalling, red-faced

baby. "nooj mee-eweshoo," she cooed. Turning to me, she said, "asdim mah. oojam jisheemsh."

I went over hesitantly and kissed my baby sister Lillian dutifully. I could not see what they saw in her. She was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. Her face was all screwed up; there were great wattles of flesh where her neck should have been; and her jet-black hair standing on end reminded me of porcupine quills. Her loud wailing was enough to drive anyone crazy, but the proud, beaming adults seemed to find great joy in listening to her.

"oojam gudick jisheemsh," my grandmother urged, pointing at a scrawny, runny-nosed, wispy-haired toddler who was stuffing her mouth with fresh bannock and bouncing up and down on *my* grandfather's lap.

The sudden news that this intruder was my other sister, Sharon, was too much. I had been told about both of them, of course, but I had chosen to ignore such annoying facts, preferring to think of myself as an only child.

With her face all smeared with butter and strawberry jam, she gave me a wide grin, and I kissed her quickly on top of the head. "meeyoy-im mac," I was told, but I refused. I was willing to kiss her, but nobody was going to get me to put my arms around her and pretend that I loved her.

"jiwab-danah in suitcase, Geniesh?" my mother asked. "nandowabt int jahgone gahbat-hamoodan."

"Now this is more like it," I thought, as I opened up the suitcase in eager anticipation. There lay a beautiful golden-haired doll. As I reached in to pick her up, the lid came crashing down on my knuckles. I let out an indignant howl and rushed over to my grandmother, who was still admiring the obnoxious baby. I sat down beside her where I sulked for the rest of the evening. It was the first time in my life that I had had to share my grandparents' affections with anybody and I did not like it one bit.

My new family stayed with us for several weeks before moving into their own cabin. I moved in with them, but the arrangement did not last very long. Feeling that my mother was not giving me the undivided attention that I deserved, I moved back in with my grandparents. Everybody seemed

contented with this arrangement. I certainly was, because I was the centre of attraction once more.

This arrangement is quite common in my tribe. The grandparents, or other close relatives, will sometimes "adopt" a child during the mother's illness or pregnancy. Depending on the child, this can work into a permanent arrangement. The grandparents are happy at having a child around in their old age; the mother, relieved of some of the work, is also happy. And since the child is free to move back any time, or eat and sleep with his parents, he does not feel neglected or abandoned.

In time, however, I became accustomed to having other children around. I had no choice. My aunts and uncles were settling down and raising families, keeping my grandmother busy delivering babies. We did not have a doctor and the nurse, usually a practical nurse, did not deliver babies, so the old women of the tribe acted as midwives.

Births were always a big mystery to the children. We were never told until the actual delivery that a baby had been expected, and I was six before I unravelled the mystery of where babies come from.

I had invited myself along on a seine-fishing trip to the rapids about twenty miles up the river from the island, and we were on our way by dawn. The group consisted of five young children, two teen-aged boys, Willie and John, my aunt Edna, her sister Marianne, and their mother Agnes, one of my numerous grandmothers. I had practically inherited all of them as relatives when Edna had married one of my uncles.

While playing during a lull in the fishing on the second carefree day at the rapids, we saw the old woman, Agnes, beckoning to us wildly. "jeebeok! jeebeok!" she yelled. "asdimik mah! shash jig-boosnahno."

"jah-gone ahk?" we whined, annoyed at having our trip cut short unexpectedly.

"baj-meok inhee," she ordered, pointing at the pile of packed burlap sacks outside the tepee.

We dashed back and forth between the tepee and the river handing her and the two boys our camping equipment as they

loaded everything into the small canoe. My aunt Edna and Marianne were nowhere in sight.

When everything had been loaded, John and Willie pulled the canvas off the tepee, and there sat my aunt, moaning and groaning quietly, with Marianne bent solicitously over her. The two boys helped her into the canoe and lay her down gently.

“dan-i-tick Eedna? jig-boonibmatsee wah?” we asked nonchalantly.

The old woman was appalled at our casual assumption that Edna was dying. She told us quickly that Edna was merely suffering from an upset stomach, and ordered us into the canoe. She and Marianne climbed in beside my writhing aunt, who was obviously suffering from more than an upset stomach.

We paddled and we paddled. The old woman refused to give us a moment's rest. My arms felt as if they were going to fall off. My grandparents had always let me paddle by myself when we were travelling down the river and I had never had any difficulty in getting us home. What I did not know was that there is an eight-knot current in the river and we would have drifted home anyway without anybody having to paddle. They always let me think that I was solely responsible for getting us safely home. This impatient and excitable woman, however, was not satisfied with our efforts.

“bim-shkash-juk!” she yelled repeatedly. “We are, we are,” I thought peevishly, my muscles aching more with each strenuous pull.

My aunt's groans and moans got louder and longer. It was obvious to me that she was going to die any minute. The subject of death had always been treated so casually at home that I was not frightened at all.

“Kokum, nas-tahbaw ndeeyah-eeween,” I complained, setting my paddle down.

“bim-shkashj!” Agnes yelled, thwacking me over the head with her hard paddle. Something exploded in my head. Birds chirped, and the most glorious display of Northern Lights I had ever seen shimmered before me. I picked up my paddle and did not complain again.

Suddenly, my aunt reached over and clutched her mother's arm. With perspiration running down her red face, and obviously with great effort, she urgently whispered one word, "shash!"

"Now? How did she know the time had come," I wondered.

"John! nahdah eesbeetah oot!" the old woman ordered, pointing at a sandy beach ahead. The knuckles of her hand were white against her dark brown skin as she strained mightily with each powerful stroke. She patted my aunt on the head. "gahbit! gahbit!" she whispered gently. It was the first time I had heard of anyone trying to hold off death.

By the time we scampered out of the canoe, she had thrown half the equipment up on the sand and was barking orders to us. Turning to my aunt, who was doubled over clutching at her stomach, she begged, "gahbit! gahbit!"

My suffering aunt, whom I admired immensely for being so cheerful at a time like this, managed a weak smile. "gishee-ewe ah, 'gahbit'?" she croaked. I did not know either how the old woman could expect her to wait.

We dashed around, bumping into each other as we tried to be helpful. "asa, nahgah! jimdadow mah meechwap," Marianne suggested in exasperation. The old woman thought it was a brilliant idea and they pitched the tepee before doing anything else.

The old woman handed me a water bucket. "Geniesh! ndowabt nibee!" she ordered. She sent the other children in search of firewood.

My poor aunt, who was trying desperately to hang on amidst all this confusion, kept whimpering between spasms, "shash, nahgah!"

"gahbit! gahbit!" repeated the old woman.

Finally the tepee was pitched, the firewood was collected, the water buckets were filled, and the fire was started. She sent the two boys back to the island to fetch some men, and ordered us to play quietly; she then disappeared into the tepee, from which emanated muffled screams.

For the first time, I began to get scared. I had not realized

that death was so prolonged or so painful. Suddenly, there was a hushed silence, followed a few seconds later by the sound of a loud slap, the squalling of an angry baby, and happy laughter. We looked at each other in total confusion.

A few minutes later, the old woman emerged from the tepee laughing and crying and wiping her face and arms. "meen ndowabt nibee, Geniesh," she said quietly, handing me a bucket. Then she said to no one in particular, "eeshquoshshe-ewe."

A baby girl? Where had she come from? "dant gah-ootin-ahk-nood?" I asked. She did not answer.

I asked Annie, who being seven and the oldest was an expert in these matters. She told us condescendingly that everyone knew where babies came from—they came from bumps in the ground. Bumps in the ground? I had always thought those bumps were rotted tree stumps, but I could not question an expert. I suggested excitedly that we dig around for more babies, but we spent the afternoon in vain.

At twilight we heard the sound of a kicker—a canoe with a small motor on its stern—in the distance. John and Willie were returning with three other men and the minister. They were towing our canoe behind them. The services of the minister were not needed as my aunt had made a miraculous recovery, but he disappeared inside the tent anyway while the others busied themselves tying the two canoes together side by side and loading them. The tepee was taken down and the canvas made into a makeshift stretcher for my relaxed and smiling aunt.

The heavy spray which sloshed over between the two canoes soon soaked us, but we did not care. It was the first time any of us had ever travelled by motor and we were all excited about this new means of travel. It certainly beat paddling.

In no time at all, we were back home, sopping wet, exhausted, but very excited about the baby we had found. My aunt was taken immediately to the nursing station, but my new-born cousin came home with us to be shown off to all the relatives and friends.

My grandmother tied a black knotted thread around the

baby's neck to ward off evil spirits, something that she would wear for the vulnerable first few months of her life. (The thread had to be black because evil spirits emerged only at night. Unable to see the thread in the dark, they became entangled in the knots until the first rays of sunlight could kill them.) Only after she had been safely protected was she allowed to join her mother.

“nooj ndee-dinan oowash gamskoojij,” I murmured sleepily when my grandmother tucked me into bed. She agreed that finding a baby in the woods was indeed exciting.

Shortly after my cousin's birth, I was rummaging around as usual in my grandmother's personal belongings when I came across a washbasin with what looked like parchment paper wrapped around its bottom. I pulled out the basin and started peeling off the covering. My grandmother let out a shriek of alarm.

She explained it was a bag (the amniotic sac) which was wrapped around the baby when it was born. The grandmother saved the bag to ensure the new-born a long and happy life. If the bag tore when it was peeled off, the baby would die during infancy or early childhood. If it came off in one piece, however, the baby would have a long life. She peeled it off gently and it came off in one piece. She smiled happily as she folded it carefully and tucked it into her prayer book for safekeeping.

At last I knew the secret of life. I couldn't wait to tell Annie that babies did not come from bumps in the ground; they came wrapped up like cheese!

The gods of Grace and Fortune were not present on the blustery Sunday morning in December when I was born. I started out life with ants in my pants, literally.

My mother and my grandparents had spent the previous summer gathering the heavy, moisture-laden orange moss that was traditionally used as a diaper liner among my tribe. They had gathered enough to last me for six months, hanging it on poles outside the tepee so that it could dry in the sun. All foreign matter was removed before the moss was stored in burlap sacks.

On the day of my birth a bag of the moss was taken out of storage and taken inside the cabin to warm up. A small piece of it was placed on top of the old cast-iron stove briefly to soften, then spread on my diaper. After I had been cleaned up and protected against evil spirits by a black knotted cord around my neck, I was dressed in clothes made from flour sacks. (It was the middle of the war and nothing else had been available at the Bay.) Then I was bundled up in layers and layers of covers and laced tightly into my papoose carrier with my legs straightened and my arms placed rigidly against my sides.

Theoretically I was then supposed to stop crying and go blissfully to sleep, but I did not. I continued crying shrilly and hysterically for hours, despite all the love and attention that was lavished on me. I was swung in my little hammock, rocked, walked, bounced, fed, sung to, whispered to, and cradled; even the willow-and-fish-skin rattle made no impression on my apparently deaf ears. All this was done first with love and concern, then with a growing resentment and frustration as I refused to be pacified.

My family wondered what they had let themselves in for and wondered what kind of monster I would turn out to be. Only my grandfather, I am told, remained calm. Having had twelve children of his own, he suggested calmly that someone check my diapers before thinking too harshly of me.

When my grandmother unlaced me and unpinned my diapers, she found my bottom full of red bumps and crawling with tiny black ants. Apparently a colony of them had made a nest for themselves in the moss. The warmth from my body had awakened them from their hibernation and they had attacked when I threatened to drown them.

My grandmother washed me off and smeared my bottom with warm goose-grease. Another bag of moss was brought in and checked thoroughly before it was used. The other bags also proved to be free of ants.

My family, regretting their unkind words and thoughts, apologized profusely by hugging me and showering me with kisses. I was put in my hammock once more, and I slept blissfully for hours, a joy to one and all.