

Chapter 20

IN June 1958, two years after I left the island, I returned to it. Indian Affairs had failed to contact me or send me a ticket, but I did not panic. Between the money an uncle had sent and what I had saved during the year, I had enough to pay my own way.

“Would you stop at Indian Affairs and ask them what they’re going to do about Samson?” Mr. Stewart asked as I boarded the waiting train. “He hasn’t been home for two years either.”

When I got to Moose Factory, three days later, I dropped in to see the agent there. Moose Factory was the Indian Affairs headquarters serving the Hudson and James Bay area. “What can I do for you, young lady?” he asked pleasantly.

Wasting no time on introductions, I presented him immediately with the problem. “Mr. Stewart wants to know if you’re going to pay Samson’s way home.”

“Wait a minute. Who is Mr. Stewart, and who is Samson? For that matter, who are you?”

“Janie Matthews. I’m from Fort George.”

“Janie Matthews. Of course. Wait a minute, Janie. I have to get something from my office.” It was obvious he did not know who I was. A few seconds later he came out of his office, beaming. “Janie, Janie, Janie,” he greeted me enthusiastically, shaking my hand. “Janie Esquimaux. How have you been? How did you get here?”

“On the train.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Sit down, will you? Now tell me, how are you doing at school? No problems? Staying out of trouble?” I nodded or shook my head as fast as he hurled the questions at me. “Good, good. We haven’t had any bad reports about you.”

It didn’t look as if they had had any reports about me at all, I felt like pointing out. “What about Samson?” I asked.

“Samson. Is he the boy who left Fort George when you did?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him. We’ll send him a ticket. We always take care of our Indians. You know that. Now, what about you? Are you going back to school this fall?”

“I don’t know. I can’t afford it. I spent all the money I had paying for my tickets home,” I answered sadly, hoping he would offer to reimburse me.

“Oh, don’t worry about money. I told you we always look after our Indians. We’ll get you back. We’ll take care of everything. When are you going back to Fort George?”

“Tomorrow.”

“All right. Behave yourself while you’re at home. I expect to see you back here in August.” He shook my hand energetically.

The next morning while I was waiting for the luggage and mail to be loaded into the plane, a nurse from the sanatorium came up to me with a small, squalling bundle in her arms. “Are you going up the Bay?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Oh good! Drop this baby off at Old Factory, will you?” she said, thrusting the infant into my arms.

“Wait a minute!” I called as she left. “Who am I supposed to give it to? I don’t know anybody at Old Factory.”

“The baby’s name is on a tag under that blanket. The mother is still in the hospital, but I’m sure the baby has relatives who will take care of him until she gets out. He’s been fed and changed, so you don’t have to do anything except hold him and make sure he gets off at the right place.”

As soon as I was seated comfortably inside the plane, I peeled back the layers and layers of blankets that covered the baby. Judging from his blotchy red face, his piercing cry, and his crossed, vacantly staring eyes—when he stopped crying long enough to listen to my hushing—he was no more than a month old. I tried to pacify him by jiggling and bouncing him furiously in my arms, but he only screamed louder. As soon as we were in the air, however, he calmed down and went to sleep.

At our stops in Rupert's House and Eastmain, all the old women insisted on seeing him. They showered us both with kisses, nodded knowingly, and told me how beautiful he was. I smiled and accepted the compliments. I did not even attempt to explain.

At Old Factory, I handed the sleeping baby to the first Indian who poked his head through the door. "oowan-oo?" he asked, startled.

"I don't know. It just says 'Baby boy Marks' on the paper," I replied. He nodded his head, smiled and disappeared into the waiting crowd of Indians. They all descended upon the poor little infant with shrieks of joy and laughter. I was glad to see him welcomed so heartily.

I travelled alone for the next sixty miles, and when I got off the plane at Fort George, friends and relatives soaked my shoulders with joyful tears and cracked my ribs with overzealous hugs. They were overjoyed at seeing me once again—still alive, unmolested, and obviously not yet an alcoholic.

As we walked home, enveloped in a great cloud of dust stirred up by our long procession, I tried to adjust to the great changes that had occurred during my short absence. The island seemed to have shrunk to half its normal size. Erosion from the spring thaws and the swift river had always been a problem, but I knew this did not account for the island's dwindling size. I had seen, and finally realized, how vast the world was, and now I realized just how tiny and insignificant this beloved island, this island that had constituted my whole world for fifteen years, was in relation to the larger world.

Even the language seemed to have changed. I had difficulty understanding it, but I had even greater difficulty trying to make myself understood. It had been a red-letter day when, two months after I had left the island, I discovered that I no longer thought or dreamt in Cree, but in English. I found myself having to reverse that process once again. When my relatives repeatedly laughed at my "funny accent", I refused to speak any more Cree.

The people, too, had changed. Friends I had grown up with not only refused to come near me, but giggled and

retreated, or shyly whispered “Geniesh”, when I greeted them. Everybody seemed to have aged considerably in the two years I had been absent. My dear mother looked twenty years older than her thirty-seven years. The lines in her radiant face had doubled in number and had been etched deeper by the hard life.

She told me about the new house they had. The minister had told them to tear down their old shack to make room for the new school that was being planned. It was to be built right over the spot where their old shack had stood. (Actually, the new school was built ten years later on a different site.) Reverend Montgomery had promised the church would build them a new house as payment for my stepfather’s many years of faithful service as interpreter and catechist in the Anglican Church. (Fifteen years later, they are still waiting.)

She told me about my grandmother, too ill to meet me, waiting impatiently for me. “She has a bad heart, you know. She’s supposed to do as little as possible, and she’s supposed to be on a diet, but you know your grandmother. She doesn’t think the Great Spirit will let her live a few extra years just because she’s skinny.”

I knew my grandmother would never go on a diet. Death held no frightening mysteries for her. The life hereafter was just as certain to her as life on earth; it was a beautiful and joyous life.

“Oh, there’s the house,” my mother said, pointing at a tarpaper-covered shack. She must have seen the look of dismay on my face because she added, “The outside isn’t finished yet.”

I walked in expectantly, but I was appalled at the shabbiness and seediness that surrounded me. Had I, for fifteen years, lived amid such utter poverty? Had I become a snob—as my friends had predicted I would—looking down at my own people and their old ways? My outlook and my feelings, I told myself, could not have changed so drastically in a few years.

The two-room shack was clean, but placed against a city slum, the slum would look like a palace. Against one ill-fitted, beaverboard wall was a heavily gouged wooden table loaded

with an assortment of cracked and chipped porcelain. Around the table was an odd mixture of seats: one wooden chair with a missing back, a wooden bench as heavily gouged as the table, a two-foot piece of tree trunk, and the old fold-away bed, which was always left unfolded and which collapsed when some unsuspecting visitor sat too close to either end.

Against the opposite wall sat an old wood-stove with an oven door that would not close. Against this stove was the twenty-gallon water container into which everybody dipped their cups as they needed a drink. Beside it sat a ten-gallon slop pail full of dirty dish water, tea leaves, coffee grounds, and bones. Right next to it was a soap-scummed wash stand with a badly chipped white porcelain basin in it. There were no other furnishings in the front room.

The back room was jammed with three wooden beds of varying sizes, one broken-down dresser, an old steamship trunk, and cardboard boxes filled with clothes and other belongings. Draped over the clotheslines that criss-crossed the room were clean, ironed clothes. Six people—my three sisters, my brother, my mother, and my stepfather—slept in this room.

“You can sleep on this bed,” my mother said, pointing to the fold-away bed in the front room. “It’s the only one with a mattress.”

When she suggested I eat, I told her I wanted to see my grandmother first. Actually, I wanted to get away for a while, to try and regain my perspective.

“How can they live like that?” I asked myself repeatedly. Yet, I could not deny the fact that they were completely happy even though they lacked what I had come to consider the essentials of life—electricity, indoor plumbing, all the comforts of modern living. I realized that a person could have all these things and still be unhappy. Love and happiness were all that mattered.

By the time I got to my grandmother’s shack, I felt better. I raised my hand to knock on the door, but remembered just in time that knocking before entering was considered “white” and snobbish. I barged in. My grandmother, who was

sitting on the bed making a new gill-net, looked up and started, dropping the net. Tears streamed down her beautiful brown, deeply wrinkled face as she held out her loving arms to me.

“Geniesh! Geniesh!” she cried.

I walked into her open arms, blinded by my own tears, and we embraced and kissed. She stroked my face repeatedly. “wasa, Geniesh! wasa!” she sniffled.

We chatted for some time; I, laboriously and embarrassed that I had forgotten so much of my language in two years, and she, ignoring my embarrassed attempts, reaching out to stroke my face lovingly or crush me to her in a bear hug. When I told her I had to leave, she sent up a prayer of thanks to the Great Spirit for letting her live long enough to see me once more. (She lived another twelve years, long enough to see me six more times and to see the first two of my four children. Each time, she told me she was lucky to see me again; she was expecting her death notice any day.)

When I walked into our house the second time, I did not see the shabby surroundings, but only the warmth and love which filled the room. The old familiar odour of stewing goose and freshly baked bannock assailed my nostrils, and for the first time in four days I began to feel hungry.

My mother ladled out some stew, fishing around in the pot for the drumstick, and placed the steaming plate in front of me. She cautioned me not to eat too much warm bannock or I would get bloated. She sat down opposite me, dabbing at her moist eyes, and looking at me with such love and joy in her face that I began to feel uncomfortable.

“Why don’t you eat?” I asked, hoping to get her mind on something else.

“No, no. I’ll wait until you’ve eaten all you want,” she said. “I cooked it for you.”

“How come Lillian and Susan aren’t in school?” I asked, referring to my sisters who were fighting and screaming outside.

“They don’t go to school any more.”

“Why not?” I exclaimed. Lillian was twelve and Susan was nine.

“Reverend Montgomery kicked them out of school. He says only the Indian children can go to the Indian schools. The white-status children can’t go there anymore. Only Indians.” Since my stepfather was a white-status Indian, so were my half-sisters.

“Well, isn’t Sharon in school?” Sharon was my fourteen-year-old sister. I had assumed she was in school when she hadn’t come around to meet me.

“Oh, no. She’s working at the school now. She’s been working in the laundry for almost a year now.”

“Why, that’s terrible!” I cried. “They should be in school. Why don’t you send them to the Catholic school then? I’m sure the Catholics wouldn’t care whether they were Indian or white-status.”

My mother was horrified. “We can’t do that! Reverend Montgomery doesn’t want the Indians sending their children there.”

“But they have to go to school!” I insisted. “All children are supposed to stay in school until they are sixteen.”

She sighed. “I know, but what can we do? He’s the minister.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to act like the king around here,” I muttered disgustedly. “If you people would stop treating him like a god, maybe he’d stop acting like one.”

My mother gasped. “Don’t talk like that about the minister!”

It was useless to pursue the matter. I knew my mother could never think of a minister as a human being, a man with faults and prejudices like everyone else. I left the table and went into the back room to unpack. She followed me.

“What’s that?” my mother asked, pointing to the ring which had fallen away from my neck as I bent over my suitcase.

“It’s just a ring,” I answered nonchalantly. I was not in the habit of discussing my love-life, which up to then had been virtually non-existent anyway, with my mother.

“Who gave it to you?” she asked, just as nonchalantly.

“A boy at school.”

“An Indian boy?” she asked. When I answered he was, she

nodded approvingly. "Is he Cree?" she continued.

"No, he's Ojibway."

Suddenly her whole attitude changed. "*Ojibway?* You cannot marry an Ojibway! I will not have an Ojibway in my house! Did he hurt you?"

Assuming she meant had he molested me sexually, I answered truthfully, "No. He never touched me." Her reaction shocked me. "What's wrong with Ojibways?" I asked.

"They're a very war-like tribe. I will not have a daughter of mine marry one."

I could not believe my ears! "For heaven's sake! The Indian wars have been over for centuries!"

"Maybe, but I don't trust Ojibways. Don't marry him."

"He hasn't even asked me."

"Why would he give you his ring if he doesn't expect to marry you?"

"Lots of boys do it. It's called 'going steady'. When a boy gives you his ring, it doesn't mean he wants to marry you; it means he wants you to go steady with him." She could not or would not understand the custom.

We called a truce. The next plane, however, broke the truce. Two letters arrived for me, both of them from Johnny. My mother delivered them to me. "I thought you said you weren't going to marry him," she said, dropping them in my lap.

I did not answer. I ripped the envelopes open. It was the first time Johnny had written because we had decided he should not send any letters to the school where they would be read and censored by Mr. Stewart.

"Well?" she asked when I started to read each four-page letter over for the third time.

"Well what?"

"Are you going to marry him?"

"He didn't ask me." One of the letters had hinted at marriage, but I did not want to upset her more by telling her that.

"Why would a boy write such long letters to a girl he didn't plan to marry?" she wondered.

The next mail plane put an end to her worries. A "friend",

who had dated Johnny before I had, thought someone should tell me my true love had been unfaithful.

Instead of writing him a letter full of harsh accusations and demands for an explanation, I decided to act like a mature woman by returning his ring. Around the ring I wrapped a short note: "I was a fool." He would know what it meant, I thought, and it would let him know he was free to ruin some other trusting girl's life.