

### Chapter 3

**C**HRISTMAS—or “Feast Day”, as we knew it—was not much different from the way the rest of the nation celebrated the holiday. I immersed myself in all the preparations—pasting multi-coloured paper chains together with flour paste; putting harnesses on the dogs and hitching them to the sled so we could scour the island for the perfect tree, one that would reach to the ceiling; decorating the tree with shiny glass balls and tinsel; and stringing bright streamers and paper chains from every conceivable place. With my grandfather taking full advantage of one of his privileges of working for the Bay, that of having first choice of what the white people had left, our cabin was always the most gaudily decorated one on the island.

My seventh Christmas is the one I remember most because it was the last I would ever spend with my family. As usual, I was the first one up. Nailed to the wall above the double bed I shared with my grandparents was a flour sack, the twenty-five pound size, brimming to the top with presents. Some were wrapped in old magazine pages and tied with string or leather strips from animal skins; others were in paper bags or sugar sacks, untied. But the wrappings did not matter, it was the contents that interested me.

I yanked the sack off the wall and tore into it. I cast aside the dresses, socks, stockings, and sweater. I lingered lovingly over the blonde, blue-eyed doll, a bag of marbles, a rubber ball, and stuffed my mouth with the pound or so of candy and gum in the bottom of the sack. After I had played with my doll and made myself slightly nauseated from too much candy, I tried on my clothes.

“wasa! wabt mah oohee. wasa jinaw-ghin,” I complained, twirling around to show my grandmother the cotton dresses that hung down to my ankles.

“ahksh gheebaw,” she commented, adding that I would

soon grow into them. She took them and stored them away for future use.

“shash nighindowabmow nighawee,” I announced, realizing I was not getting any more presents from my grandparents.

They suggested that my mother might not appreciate such an early visit, but I continued dressing. My mother was always glad to see me. I pulled on my mukluks (sealskin boots) and my rabbitskin suit, a suit consisting of long pants and a hooded jacket, a suit my great-grandmother had made by stripping rabbit skins and weaving and knotting them together in the same way she made nets.

Out I went into the still dark, sub-zero morning, looking like a giant fifty-pound snowshoe rabbit struggling through the fresh snowdrifts. I barged into my mother’s cabin. She was stoking the old wood-stove. “shash-ah?” she asked in surprise.

I replied that I had been up for a long, long time, then demanded that she hand over my sack immediately.

“bidmah jigoo-jamdin,” she laughed, but I was not interested in hugs and kisses on Christmas Day. All I wanted was my precious sack.

“dan jee?” she asked, pointing to three flour sacks nailed to the wall. One was a huge twenty-five pound sack; the others were smaller.

“mough,” I answered confidently, ripping the largest one off the wall. I reached in and pulled out more clothes, which I cast aside without a second glance. Then another doll, more candy, and an orange! I had not tasted one since summer. I did not know where she had found such a rare and priceless gift, and I relished it, segment by segment.

“shash nigmah-jeen,” I announced after I had finished my orange. I reached for my rabbitskin suit.

“nim jiweegudskan-ah shtabid-stahwin?” she asked. I shook my head. I knew there was not much sense in trying on my clothes because they would be too big. “mough gudshk,” she said, holding up a beautiful red dress trimmed with white lace.

I tried it on. The sleeves had to be folded up and the

bottom covered the top half of my mukluks. A perfect fit! “shash nig-jijshkan,” I said, but she told me I could not wear it just yet. It was for the feast that afternoon.

Off I went again, dropping my sack off at my grandparents’ cabin before making my rounds. I had many, many people to visit; not just relatives, but childless elderly people who treated me like one of their own. There was old woman Charlotte, a dear friend of my grandmother’s; old Sandy Big-Nose and his sister; and old woman Sealhunter at the other end of the island.

During the previous winters, when most of the children were in the boarding school, and those who weren’t were in the bush with their parents, I had had no one to play with, so I spent my days visiting the old people of the village. They always moaned loudly when I barged in, but they never failed to inquire about me if I missed a day. It was a rewarding pastime, especially at Christmas.

I spent the morning making my rounds, dropping flour sacks off at our cabin before going on to my next victim. Later I would have to return the sacks, usually with a small bag of flour, tea, sugar, or dried meat from my grandparents.

In the afternoon, I put on the dress my mother had given me, my new maroon sweater from my grandparents, my beautiful beaded moccasins from old woman Charlotte, my new navy-blue bloomers from my aunt Edna, and my new kelly-green scarf from old Sandy and his sister. I was ready for the feast. I felt like a princess. Reluctantly, I put on my rabbitskin suit just before leaving.

The feast, as always, was held at the Big House, so called because it was the only two-storey Indian house on the island, and it actually had six rooms instead of the usual one. The feast, a community effort with each Indian family donating what it could to it, had been prepared by the women.

My grandmother, one of the hostesses, shoved me into a small room with a plate of food: different kinds of cake, all of them hard as cement but delicious when dunked in tea; some boodin, a steamed pudding made in twenty-five to fifty pound batches; some dried goose-meat; and, of course, that nauseating mixture of powdered dried fish or meat and bear-

or goose-grease called pemmican, without which no feast could be complete.

Eating pemmican was like eating sawdust sprinkled liberally with sharp slivers, all held together by axle grease. The older Indians ate it with great gusto, but I had not yet acquired a taste for it, and after choking down a spoonful to please my grandmother, I set it aside.

The table was set and all the Indians with prestige—the chief, the councillors, the old men who worked for the church as catechists—and the oldest of the tribe were called. After the chief had thanked the Great Spirit for the abundance of food and for allowing the people to get together once more, they sat down to eat. It was not the leisurely meal that one might expect. Each person, after taking a few quick bites, whipped out a little bag or scarf, shovelled his left-overs onto it, and left to make room for someone else. The table was cleaned off, clean plates were set, food was heaped onto each plate, and the next shift of people came in. This went on until everyone had been served.

I sat quietly watching people stream in and out; the men in their brand new plaid flannel shirts, their hair oiled and slicked back; the women in their gaily coloured satin, silk, or brocade dresses and their new heavily beaded moccasins. Each woman danced a little jig or twirled around so everyone could get a good look at her new outfit. Everyone was in a good humour, laughing and joking.

As soon as the feast was over and the dishes washed and returned to their rightful owners, we trudged home with our loot: our share of the left-overs, and the gifts of dried meat, leather, dress material, tanned hides, furs, and food that people had left for my grandparents. My grandmother's prized acquisitions were giant sausages of goose grease or bear grease encased in animal intestines. I shuddered when I thought of the number of spoonfuls that were in those casings. I prayed that I would remain relatively healthy throughout the winter.

The dance that evening was also held at the Big House. While the violinist and the drummer were warming up, one

of the old men grabbed me and danced around the room with me. Everyone clapped. It was my big moment.

Before the first round was over, I was sound asleep. It had been a big day. Not even the loud music and the stomping of the dancers could awaken me. My grandparents also had had a big day and we left early. The crisp, clean winter air, so bitterly cold it burned the nostrils, jolted me awake as I staggered sleepily outside. With a great feeling of warmth and happiness, I ploughed happily through the snowdrifts behind my grandparents.

“*Jiweebahdan-ah Wisakedjak?*” asked my grandmother as she tucked me into bed. I nodded happily. Winter nights were the only time I got to hear the old legends because it was considered bad luck to tell them at any other time of the day or year. The gods would have been displeased otherwise.

I listened to her soft, soothing voice. “After the Creator had made all the animals and the first people, he said to Wisakedjak, ‘Take good care of my people and teach them how to live. Show them all the bad roots: the ones that will hurt and kill them. And do not let the people or the animals quarrel with each other.’

“But Wisakedjak did not obey the Creator. He let the creatures do whatever they wanted. Soon they were quarrelling, fighting, and killing.

“The Creator, greatly displeased, warned Wisakedjak, ‘If you do not keep the ground clean, I will take everything away from you, and you will be miserable.’ But Wisakedjak did not believe the Creator and did not obey Him. Becoming more and more careless and disobedient, he tricked the animals and the people and made them angry with each other. They quarrelled and fought so much that the earth became red with blood.

“This time the Creator was very angry. ‘I will take everything away from you and wash the earth clean,’ He said.

“Still Wisakedjak did not believe Him. He did not believe until the rains came and the streams began to swell. Day after day, night after night, the rains continued. The water in the rivers and the lakes rose higher and higher. At last they

overflowed their banks and washed the ground clean. The sea came up on the land, and everything was drowned except one Otter, one Beaver, and one Muskrat.

“Wisakedjak tried to stop the sea, but it was too strong for him. He sat down on the water and wept. Otter, Beaver, and Muskrat sat beside him and rested their heads on his lap.

“In time the rains stopped. Wisakedjak took courage, but he did not dare speak to the Creator. After long, sad thoughts about his misery, he said to himself, ‘If I could get a bit of the old earth beneath the water, I could make a little island for us to live on.’

“He did not have the power to create anything, but he did have the power to expand what had already been created. As he could not dive and he did not know how far it was to the old earth, he did not know what to do. Taking pity on him, the Creator said, ‘I will give you the power to remake everything if you will use the old materials buried under the water.’

“Still floating on the flood waters, Wisakedjak said to the three animals beside him, ‘We shall starve unless one of you can bring me a bit of old ground beneath the water. If you will get it for me, I will see that you have plenty of fish to eat.’

“So the Otter dived, but he came up again without having reached the ground. A second time and a third time Wisakedjak praised the Otter and persuaded him to go down *once* more. When he returned the third time, he was so weary that he could not dive again.

“‘You are a coward!’ taunted Wisakedjak. ‘I am surprised by your weak heart. I know Beaver can dive to the bottom of the flood. He will put you to shame.’

“Then he turned to Beaver. ‘You are brave and strong and wise. If you will dive into the water and bring up a bit of the old earth, I will make a good house for you on the new island I shall make. There you will be warm in the winter. Dive straight down, as a brave beaver does.’

“Twice Beaver dived and twice he came back without any earth. The second time he was so tired that Wisakedjak had to let him rest for a long time.

“ ‘Dive one more time,’ begged Wisakedjak when Beaver had recovered. ‘If you will bring me a bit of earth, I will make you a wife.’ To obtain a wife, Beaver went down a third time. He stayed so long that he came back almost lifeless, still with no earth in his paws.

“Wisakedjak was now very sad. If Otter and Beaver could not reach the bottom, surely Muskrat would also fail. But he must try! He was their only chance.

“ ‘You are brave and strong and quick, Muskrat, even if you are small. If you will dive into the water and bring me a bit of the old earth at the bottom, I will make plenty of roots for you to eat. I will create rushes, so that you can make nice houses with them.

“ ‘Otter and Beaver are fools,’ continued Wisakedjak. ‘They got lost. You will find the ground if you dive straight down.’

“So Muskrat jumped head first into the water. Down and down he went, but he brought back nothing. A second time he dived and stayed a long time. When he returned, Wisakedjak looked at his forepaws and sniffed. ‘I smell the smell of earth,’ he said. ‘Go down again. If you bring me even a small piece, I will make a wife for you, Muskrat. She will bear you many children. Have a strong heart now. Go straight down as far as you can go.’

“This time Muskrat stayed so long that Wisakedjak feared he had drowned. At last they saw some bubbles coming up through the water. Wisakedjak reached down with his long arm, seized Muskrat, and pulled him up beside him. The little creature was almost dead, but against his breast, his forepaws clutched a piece of the old earth!

“Joyously, Wisakedjak seized it, and in a short time, he had expanded the bit of earth into an island. There he, Muskrat, Otter, and Beaver rested and rejoiced that they had not drowned in the flood.

“Some people say that Wisakedjak obtained some bits of wood from which he made trees; that he obtained some bones from which he made the second race of animals. Others say that the Creator made all things again. He commanded the rivers to take salt water back to the sea. Then He created mankind, the trees, and the animals of today. He took from

Wisakedjak all power over people and animals, leaving him only the power to flatter and deceive. After all, Wisakedjak had played tricks upon the animals and people and had led them into much trouble.

“That is why the Indians tell many stories about him, to amuse themselves during the long winter evenings.”

My grandmother kissed me gently and I snuggled deeper into the warm goose-down comforter. A perfect ending to a perfect day!

It was a wonderful childhood, full of fond memories, but it had to come to an end; partly through my own strong curiosity and stubbornness, but mostly because of the “system”.

On our island were two boarding schools; one Catholic and one Anglican. Because the Indians, being trappers, were scattered all over northern Quebec for ten months out of each year, their children had to live at the school to get an education.

All the children at that time entered the Anglican boarding school because, except for one family, we were all Anglicans. Even though the Catholics promised clothes, food, and jobs to families who sent children to their school, they had less than five students from our island. Their students came from other Indian settlements on both sides of the bay. Our parents were too terrified by the constant threats of eternal hell and damnation to send their children to the Catholic school.

By Christmas I had already been attending classes for five months at the Anglican school as a day student—a “privilege” whose significance held no meaning for me at the time. I wanted to live at the school and could not understand my family’s reaction whenever the subject was brought up. They cried and carried on as if I were about to move permanently from the island instead of just a few yards away.

The previous summer, when the time had come to register me at the boarding school and hand over my life to the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, my grandparents had dried their tears and had taken me down to the school.

We shuffled uncertainly into Reverend Dawson’s office.



Reverend Dawson was also the school principal. He was short and stout with a ruddy complexion. The top of his head was completely bald and a fringe of white hair went around the back of his head from ear to ear.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t have any more room,” he greeted us. “She’ll have to wait until next August.”

My grandfather’s face broke out in a radiant smile. “gish-she-ewe? gish-she-ewe?” my grandmother asked impatiently. My grandfather told her the terrible news. Her face lit up and she started to cry.

Throwing myself down at their feet, I beat the floor with my fists, kicked my legs in the air, and shrieked that I hated them all. It was all their fault. The temper tantrum I threw was unbecoming a stoical, unemotional, expressionless Indian child.

“Can she still go to school?” my grandfather asked.

“Yes, yes, yes. She can attend classes if she wants,” Reverend Dawson replied quickly, possibly to get me out of his office immediately.

I was removed bodily from the office, and as soon as we were out of Reverend Dawson’s hearing range, I was dropped unceremoniously on the ground. “gah madooshj! dan jigh-dighmisk eemhowjimow?” they scolded, but I did not care what the minister thought of me. I *had* to live at the school! “beejalkshoo-goomguj jigeedoot-heet-nan!” my grandmother threatened.

I surrendered. The missionaries had done their job well and I was terrified of Catholics. I did not want to live in some dumb old Catholic school; I wanted to live at “The St. Philip’s Indian and Eskimo Anglican Residential School of Fort George, Quebec, Canada.”