2008

MITAKUYE OYASIN

Grace Caron Chaillier

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By

Grace Caron Chaillier

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Studies Office

2008

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ABSTRACT

MITAKUYE OYASIN

By

Grace Caron Chaillier

Part One is a trilogy about three friends: “Living Service” about my longtime friendship with a local funeral home director; “Peggie’s Path” about a soft souls’ hard life; and “Ghost Follower” about a Brooklyn transplant student and activist.

Part Two is a tetralogy about four annual spiritual retreats between 2004 and 2007: “The Gathering” (2004) and “Gathering Again” (2005), the first and second of four stories about attendances at the American Indian Women’s Gathering on Mackinac Island; “Turtle Island” (2006) and “Mekinak Women” (2007) are the third and fourth in this collection.

Part Three is two essays about family and two about work: “Traveling Home” reveals the love of travel I inherited from family, while “Second Opinion” tells of a journey to the nearest major medical facility with an aging, ill parent. “The Business of Word Dancing” details the public appearance of one of Indian Country’s best and brightest, yet dependably controversial. “A Working Life” is a career history emphasizing the industriousness of Native Americans who are often judged as lazy.

Part Four is two braided essays: “Watching Rain,” a short story that sprang from my mother’s haunting experience in an Indian boarding school and “Watching Rain: Indian Boarding School Case Study” that explains this hybrid of fiction and nonfiction’s inclusion in this body.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Wilma Verna Chaillier and Wilbert Roy Chaillier, and to my sister, Mary Patrice Henson.

It is also dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, Grace Pearl Burnett Giroux and Vern Clyde Giroux. I will always miss you.

She tries her wings in short excursions.

Virgil (regendered)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis director, Dr. Ron Johnson, for his thoughtfulness, patience, availability, and for his prudent choice of classroom reading materials; Drs. Paul Lehmberg and Candy Bays for serving as readers and as my thought-provoking professors, in several classes each; John Oberstar, Peggie Shelifoe, and Maryanne Brown, who all gave generously of their time to make the trilogy that comprises Part One possible. I thank my sister Mary for listening patiently and offering advice sparingly. I am grateful to April Lindala for answering every question with exemplary forbearance and kindness. I thank Robelle Degenaer for her teachings and her generous contribution of the historical timeline of the Native American Women's Gathering on Mackinac Island. I appreciate Dr. Katie Hanson's risk-taking for extending an opportunity to a student with no writing background. That consideration set me on this MFA path. And I thank Shirley Brozzo who mentored me through years of my college experience including that first fiction writing workshop when she was my fellow student.

I appreciate having been chosen as a King*Chavez*Parks Future Faculty Fellow. The fellowship's support has played an integral part in my ability to continue the MFA process. I am grateful for several graduate assistantships from which I have gleaned much.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

This prelude feels like finale. The thesis puzzle pieces that remain to be fitted are straightforward, obvious, time-efficient bits. I never considered not writing this scrap of the challenge last. Then an officemate told me that her friend, a woman I know, is writing the introduction to her thesis too – in advance of the thesis proper. This prompted contemplation of our writing choices which, in turn, brought Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* to mind.

I opened that text, slipped through the pages, thinking of solace or at least of humor (this last a frustration – why haven't I written more humorously? I want to but don't seem to know how. The body that follows feels as serious as cancer with too few exceptions.) So, I was feeling the need of support. Since I am drawn to nature writing, Dillard's work entices me, pulls me to bookshelves, instigates rereads of "Living Like Weasels" and "Seeing." *Three by Annie Dillard* came to me as a gift, a particularly meaningful way for anything to come into an Indian's life. I caressed the words that comprise *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *An American Childhood* early on but not those of *The Writing Life* until now.

I *am* finding what I need, if not necessarily what I longed for (or thought I craved). I admire Dillard's ability to spin humor in her own direction, to poke fun at her writing process, along with peripheral endeavors that support it, and to chuckle at her own foibles. She struts trickster characteristics. "I know you've heard this before," she seems to say, "but I bet you're doing it anyway. Be steadfast, but don't take yourself too seriously." She reminds the reader in many passages how writing seriously day after day

utterly lacks glamour. Though thousands aspire to succeed at writing, it is draining, daunting, often dirty work. It certainly is in my world of thickening dust, cascading laundry, and teetering stacks of dishes, everything gaining height while I hunch lower, lose posture, strike keys. I have a telling urge toward housework. It's difficult for me to reconcile any yearning of mine to physically clean house. So unlike me. Yet I recognize this for what it is – the inclination to avoid, to put off, to procrastinate the writing. It's a wonder I've arrived at this point at all – this position where I see light at the end of the thesis-embedded tunnel. Yet, here I am. And with few haunting illusions, thanks to Dillard who rightly reminds us that "this writing that you do, that so thrills you, that so rocks and exhilarates you, as if you were dancing next to the band, is barely audible to anyone else" (560). Vastly true more for my work than for hers. And rightly so – she is a craftsperson; I feel like a dabbler.

I am also an Indigene hybrid – part Lakota and part French Canadian. It is from the Lakota identity that I most often write. Documents continue to amass on the subject of Indian identity in the Americas, more and more actually written by Indians themselves. As a scholar and a college instructor my focus on issues of indigenous identity endures, while concerns regarding who I am continually alter. We Indians consider identity often, particularly those of us who are part-bloods. Louise Erdrich, who is Ojibwe and German, writes in *Antelope Wife* about constructing an elaborate "drama of identity" (112). Many aboriginals contemplate this component of how we are perceived, what drives us, this ongoing recreation of Indian self. So much change was forced on our ancestors that many

Indians learned to be changelings. Parts of us will always be the expedient temporary, while other elements of who we are remain timeless. This, in itself, makes our identity complicated beyond the fact that hundreds of tribes have survived and within them thousands of bands and tens of thousands of clans. Shifting combinations of Indian self make us unusual. Philip J. Deloria maintains, "It is clear that, despite various policies aimed at assimilation, Indians – at least the Lakota, and potentially everyone else – [have] retained and rebuilt a sense of their own uniqueness. They [see] themselves as distinct" (34). We often do see ourselves as extraordinary. Many of us continue a tradition of transformation that we see as part of a distinguishing cultural experience that our ancestors managed generation upon generation. Deloria declares, "Again and again, they created new Indian worlds, fusing diverse cultures, or fitting themselves into the interstices between a core Native tradition and new practices introduced from the American periphery" (114). This is the legacy I honor, a gift far beyond survival, rather an inheritance that deserves my tribute performed to the best of my ability. This body of work is part of my attempt to pay homage to my antecedents for the identity that I am fortunate to trace and that I continue to embrace with countless behaviors and in varying styles. Within interconnected communities, like Deloria and many other aboriginals, I too, compose an Indian world.

The title of the body within, *Mitakuye Oyasin,* reflects this honoring. It can be translated as 'to all our relations' or 'we are all related.' A bronze statue on a downtown Rapid City, South Dakota, street portrays the idea effectively in three-dimensional artistry (www.city-

data.com/picfilesv/picv5600.php). Its swirls and lines thrust forward into the prairie wind projecting movement of an Indian male countenance enveloped by eagle above his head and turtle over his heart with buffalo peering out from under the protection of eagle and man's body. Within the figure's chest is a globe, a world – his body is our Mother Earth – with the Americas facing the viewer. Interconnected relatedness is the overwhelming message. As solidly as are these flowing bronze elements representative of connection, so are their living counterparts actually joined. Every living thing complements and depends on one another in our merged realities. When we care for the component, we maintain the whole, as is the opposite true.

I attempt to sustain, to nourish indigeneity and the tenets that craft us, continue to remake who we are. The twelve short stories and the case study within all bead Native patterns, to borrow Louise Erdrich's aptly evocative metaphor. In some, the beads are a tight, close-set concentration of aboriginal experience, while others scatter only a few streamers, tracking memory. All of them have been informed and inspired by the contemporary Native prose of a growing clan of American Indian writers who feel like kinfolk. That group currently includes: Sherman Alexie, Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Bird,

Joseph Bruchac, Tim Giago, Winona LaDuke, Linda Hogan, Evelina Zuni Lucero, Devon Abbott Mihesuah, Louis Owens, Luci Tapahonso, and, most of all, Louise Erdrich. I constantly seek the complex designs that these authors craft and I am comforted by anthologies that band them together. Among my favorites are *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America,* along with *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers,* and its sister text *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers.* And I immerse myself in these writers' individual textual productions often. In each of three sections of the Native American Experience classes I teach every year, my students and I read and discuss at length Erdrich's *Four Souls* which never feels repetitive to me; rather it's like revisiting a respected, cherished elder that personifies both wisdom and humor. (In reality, Erdrich is two years younger than I am.) Her texts read as new work perennially. They are so imbued with implication that I harvest further essence each time; they are richer with each re-engagement. At the same time, I'm curious as to what she'll produce next.

I find myself thrilled to run across her work unexpectedly as I did in the August 2006 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine. I turned the pages of my fresh issue and was suddenly looking at a photo of Erdrich riding a bicycle down a street in her hometown of Wahpeton, North Dakota. At the close of a regular department (My Hometown) article about the history of Wahpeton and her enduring connections to the land, family, and the structural town itself came a two-line announcement of a pending novel to be released in 2008. I've been looking forward to it ever since. I have my impatient eyes on the email pulse of HarperCollins' author tracker watching for *Plague of Doves*, yet feel more like an author stalker.

I have read each one of Erdrich's prose accomplishments several times. Her writing is deeply reminiscent for me. She delves into topics that I long to engage while her turn of phrase elicits smiles and nods, familiar praise. Her work feels like an effortless flow, concurrently easy of individual word yet complex in sentence-level significance. I want nothing else to do, nothing to pull me away, enough time to bend the regrettable final page without having to stop short, to be cut off. It feels like a drug, a story high. I can't get enough. I say to my students' sometimes blank faces after we've encountered a particularly poignant passage, "To be able to write like that, a rare gift we are fortunate to taste." I am rewarded with sparse, feeble agreement.

Consider the following excerpt. In *The Antelope Wife* Cally, a surviving twin, who has been observing her family set a dining room table during the Christmas holidays, narrates:

> Family stories repeat themselves in patterns and waves generation to generation, across bloods and time. Once the pattern is set we go on replicating it. Here on the handle the vines and leaves of infidelities. There, a suicidal tendency, a fatal wish. On this side drinking. On the other a repression of guilt that finally explodes. I study it now in my classes, work the meaning of it out at home. From way back our destinies form. I'm trying to see the patterns in myself and the people I love.

This passage speaks to Indian peoples' abiding belief in the intergenerational influence of family and the influences that have made those family members who they are. Cally recognizes her role as a culture bearer, and since her sister Deanna's death the sole descendant of converging bloodlines which all influence who she is and who her children will be. She seeks the extended sight, the inner vision of a seer in order to gain and retain deeper understanding. Erdrich chooses the densely imbued metaphor of beading as a device she returns to throughout the novel. Cally will be the cosmological

conduit for her intricately beaded family. These worldviews exemplify an Indian belief system embedded in lyrical prose I appreciate and seek both to read and to emulate, in my own meager fashion, in my writing. I'm hoping immersion in Erdrich's work will prove beneficial for my own and, like Annie Dillard, I believe it will. In *The Writing Life* Dillard argues, "He [the writer] is careful of what he reads, for that is what he will write. He is careful of what he learns, because that is what he will know" (590). *Hoka hey.* Let it be.

My Sicangu Lakota, Burnt Thigh clan of the Sioux Nation heritage comes to me through my mother and her relations – those she calls 'the folks' – who were born and raised on the Rosebud Reservation in south central South Dakota. As a cultural birthright, this legacy informs all my work – my teaching, my involvement at the Center for Native American Studies, my travel, and the writing that I have turned to later in life. In action and attitude I am, above all, an Indian person. I read and write through Indian-lensed eyes.

The essays included in this collection are a compilation of personal profile, event narrative, travel writing, and memoir that speak to my Indianness and that of friends and acquaintances, along with our concerns on myriad Indian subject matter. As *Mitakuye Oyasin* braids us, so are those of us who are Indian and/or study and concern ourselves with the Native American experience entwined, ever more intimately. This work reveals

us, illustrates our interaction with mainstream society, and details our aspirations as indigenous people and our relationships with those who care for us.

Part One is a trilogy of profiles that illuminate fragments of the lives of three people I am fortunate to call my friends. “Living Service” details the working life of local funeral home director John Oberstar. “Peggie’s Path” exemplifies the hard life of one of the softest souls I’ve ever met, Peggie Shelifoe, and “Ghost Follower” tracks the paranormal interests of Brooklyn transplant, Maryanne Brown, a student whose activism has drawn me.

Part Two is an event narrative tetralogy about getaways to an annual spiritual retreat that I attended over four consecutive years, a number holy and sacred to American Indians. “The Gathering” and “Gathering Again” are accounts that follow my participation in the annual Native American Women’s Gathering on Mackinac Island the first and second years that I participated. “Turtle Island” and “Mekinak Women” detail endeavors and accomplishments of years three and four at that same get-together.

Part Three is four essays, two about family and two about work. **“**Traveling Home” is a snippet of family history that reveals the love of travel I inherited from both sides of my family, while “Second Opinion” relates the story of a journey to the nearest major medical facility with an aging, ill parent. “The Business of Word Dancing” details the public appearance of one of Indian Country’s best and brightest, yet dependably controversial as a Native American Literature Symposium keynote speaker in 2007. “A Working Life” is my synopsized career history that endeavors to underscore, once again, as Indian people are inclined to do, the industriousness of Native Americans who have been stereotyped otherwise.

Part Four is a short story and a case study, two braided essays on one of the most important subjects in Indian Country. **“**Watching Rain” is a short story that sprang from a particular, never-forgotten experience of my mother’s in an Indian boarding school and “Watching Rain: Indian Boarding School Case Study” provides the larger cultural context of how this short story came to be written. It is via this piece, here in this place, that I, like Evelina Zuni Lucero and so many other Indian authors, write as an act of resistance. I resist the idea that Watching Rain cannot or should not be included in a creative nonfiction thesis. It is integrated into this collection because the history it records was, in so many ways, the very experience of people drawn into various boarding schools for a number of reasons during different times. “Watching Rain,” as I argue in the case study comment, is reality fictionalized rather than fictional reality.

Sherman Alexie has commented on the Indian reality that so much has been taken from our people that many refuse to give up anything more (10). We each draw our own lines beyond which we refuse to flex. Indian literature has its own traditions, customs, and habits. For example, Indian writers use repetition in their work. Where we read and write repetition as chant and even as prayer, some non-Indians don’t or won’t understand our way. Some of us have refused to have that echo, that reverberation workshopped or edited out of our writing. This is but one example of ongoing resistance to changing a style of performance that reflects our cultural heritage, resistance to homogenization from our viewpoint. These considerations are always with me.

For some time, I have considered that the blurring of lines between fiction and nonfiction might indeed be a tendency for Indians because of the blurring of reality and truth with emptiness and lies in the first English written documents that Indians came into contact with, namely treaties. Over a ninety year period between 1778 and 1868, the U.S. signed 367 treaties with Indian nations, none of which were lived up to and kept as the letter of law by federal, state, and local government representatives or by ordinary citizens who attached very little importance to the claims of Indians. Is it any wonder that Indian peoples have alternative impressions about writing fiction and nonfiction in English?

In our contributions and influences, we continue to bead one another, to bead our lives and those of our characters and personages, some of us decidedly more skillfully than others. In honing my skills, in becoming increasingly aware of shifts in my rendition of this craft, I am aware of the subtle shifts in what now pours onto the page when compared with what I clumsily wrote during that first Katie Hanson fiction class in the fall semester of 2004. I recognize some improvement, yet there is room for so much more. The way, of course, to accomplish that is to continue critically caressing language, to go on day after day pondering and finessing words into story, record, account, essay, and narrative.

In the meantime, I offer the following eleven stories and a case study and short story combination. They are part of my song, my hoop. In many ways, they are me. I am what I write.

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Part One

Three Friends

Through the stories everything is made possible.

Yellowman (Navajo)

Living Service

A funeral is not death, any more than baptism is birth or marriage union. All three are the clumsy devices, coming now too late, now too early, by which Society would register the quick motions of man.

E.M. Forester

John Oberstar, Jr. has been a funeral director in the Lake Superior waterfront town of Marquette, Michigan, for more than thirty-three years. We've known one another almost that long. He is a robust, middle-aged man with straight black hair, dark eyes, and wide brows in a round face. Like the dark suits he prefers for funerals, his casual wardrobe runs to deep shades. In colder weather, the wings of a good black trench coat sail in his wake as he sprints across parking lots in black suede traction shoes.

Until very recently, he carried a beeper round-the-clock, always personally responding to death calls throughout sprawling Marquette County in Michigan's rural Upper Peninsula and usually performing what's termed in the business "a removal of the deceased" within forty-five minutes. Some of his friends refer to this facet of John's work as "fetching a DB" (dead body) and smile to themselves at the use of the word fetching, certainly as a verb in this context rather than an adjective. Some of us still think of him as always-on-the-clock. To be his companion, to spend time with him, is to know that at any moment, anywhere, he might receive a death call and everything else will become secondary. We have an annual tradition of going to dinner on Christmas Eve and exchanging gifts. One recent Christmas John answered a death call instead. Some years

back, on another Christmas Eve, we'd just received our entrees at one of the better supper clubs in town, The Landmark Inn, when he reached to his side to view his vibrating beeper. Ten minutes later we were in the van, on our way to a removal. He's refused dozens of invitations to friends' camps, outlying social gatherings, and boating trips because he chooses not to inconvenience or disturb anyone by leaving abruptly. For many years, because he has no family in town, he answered death calls for other local funeral directors who engineered the day so that their holiday with their relatives and friends would be uninterrupted.

When asked about his business philosophy, John says, "The old-fashioned idea of service is fast disappearing from the contemporary scene, but appropriate arrangement of funerals is and always will be based on service to families. Anyone can box a body or put it in a retort or grave. It is the person of understanding, caring, and compassion that makes the difference. I do not regret my choice of vocation. Everything from embalming to printing necessary paperwork, placing flowers, ordering caskets, working wakes and funerals and much more has remained as fresh as the first day. I am thankful for that." His work time continues to be filled with countless tasks that a funeral director accomplishes every day. Typically, he opens the funeral home at nine o'clock each morning, checks the outside walks and driveway for debris, does the same with the carpeting inside the funeral home, inspects bathrooms and light fixtures that might need replenishment or changing, answers the phone, speaks to casket and urn companies, sets appointments, meets with families to discuss burial clothing, music, flowers, luncheons, final dispositions and cemetery markers. His day continues with preparing for visitations, moving furniture, arranging family photographs, preparing the reception areas for a

group, completing and disbursing paperwork like death certificates, insurance benefits and cremation authorizations and scheduling churches, clergy, organists, soloists, and food servers. He orders catered food and calls cemeteries to make interment arrangements with sextons. He places flowers, sets the register book, creates and prints prayer cards. He calls Wilbert, Inc.'s Escanaba location to arrange for burial vaults into which caskets fit and to make plans for cremations. He writes obituaries and faxes them to *The Mining Journal* and other newspapers requested by families. All this and more, he accomplishes after he's embalmed the deceased and before he receives their friends and family for either the visitation or the funeral. And beyond the funeral home itself, on a recent July 3rd evening, he and I placed American flags on streetlight poles up and down six blocks of North Third Street, since the funeral home belongs to the Third Street Business Association. He probably also collected them at the holiday's conclusion.

John was born at St. Francis Hospital in Escanaba, Michigan, and raised on a farm outside Trenary, nearly equidistant between his current home in Marquette and his birthplace. His first experience with death was the passing of a first grade classmate who had suffered from leukemia. The boy, whose name was Dennis, came from a poor family and since their rural school was small, his absence from the classroom was particularly noticeable. The children learned all the details of the funeral from a classmate who'd overheard an account shared among adults. John and a few others listened intently since death and the details surrounding it were not discussed openly in the early 1950s, especially with young children. John was saddened by Dennis's passing and amazed that his absence from their country school classroom would be permanent. The concept of

death's reality and its inherent finality were forming in his mind. Two years later, he would come to know much more about death's dramatic customs.

While in the third grade, John witnessed the coming and going of a memorial procession in his hometown. He says, "I remember standing in the school driveway and looking across a field at the Methodist Church. A funeral was about to take place; the big black car pulled up and parked in front of the church. A dark box was carried up the stairs. I watched in amazement when, sometime later, the box was carried back out, placed in the car, and a line of cars slowly moved away toward the cemetery." This, he recalls thinking, was drama at its best. At eight years of age, he recognized the performance aspect of what he'd watched and was drawn to it. Though he wouldn't realize it for some time, this was his first attraction to the business of staging funerals. Many questions formed in his young mind and this curiosity grew as he did. However, he was afraid to broach the subject with anyone. Death's ceremony was not discussed by anyone he knew. He also understood that children were sheltered from its realm. For several more years, John quietly observed these comings and goings, until piano lessons brought him inside a church to participate in and view the rituals first hand.

At age twelve, after having begged his mother for piano lessons for some time, she finally relented and he began studying and playing under the tutelage of an NMU music student. His family didn't own a piano, so he practiced at the Lutheran Church where his family were parishioners. After a few years, he'd learned a repertoire of hymns and liturgy. And then came the day when the regular organist failed to show up for services. The pastor approached John and said, "You play, don't you? Just get us started until the organist from the Methodist Church can get here to take over." The Methodists'

organist, a friend of John's, arrived and thinking it would be a good experience for him, she sat next to his mother in the pews rather than relieving John at the organ. So began a twenty-three year interval as a church organist. Along with Sunday services and weddings, John began playing for funerals as well. As an organist, he played an integral role in the church drama reenacted at the end of human lives. During this time and even beyond, he was more interested in this element and the products and accoutrements of funerals than he was in what he would later refer to as "the powdered guest of honor."

For twenty-five years, John has lived in an apartment above Forsberg Flowers, two doors away from the Fassbender Funeral Home on north Third Street in Marquette. While attending Northern Michigan University, he worked at Forsberg Flowers as a floral designer. That's where we met; I worked there too. One of the flower delivery drivers was Butch Fassbender, the brother of Mike Fassbender, who was funeral director at Fassbender's. John helped Butch with delivering flowers to "the home" and Mike began asking him to help casket bodies. Lifting a body into a casket is recommended as a two-person job to avoid back injuries. He was at ease with the process in a way people drawn to the funeral business often are. He says of those first physical contacts with the dead, "I guess I didn't think too much about it." Memories of the first funeral he attended as a mourner, for a neighbor who died while he was in high school, come to him as we sit in his office. He recalls his parents impressing upon him the importance of the family paying their respects together.

As we often do, we're sitting in his bright, comfortable second floor workplace above Fassbender's reception areas. Before his first visit to a funeral home, he had

imagined that they must be like ancient castles, with stone walls lit by flaming torches set in oversized sconces amid a general décor of black gloom and doom. He smiles at the memory of how pleasantly surprised he was to find himself in light, comfortable, homey surroundings similar to those where we now sit. The surprise gave way to curiosity about other aspects of the business. The interest he'd internalized years before resurfaced. He began to carefully look around. In addition to his neighbor Rudy, a 104 year-old man was also being viewed. The boxes in which the men lay drew his attention.

Sitting at his deeply paper-strewn, hulking, ancient desk, his dark eyes meet mine and he says, "I took special note of the caskets and, since we were early, I had time to examine the funeral home's key product. Rudy looked nice, and because he was a member of the Secular Franciscan Order, he was clothed in the habit of a Franciscan monk, as is the custom of the SFO. Nowadays, I am a convert to the Catholic faith and a member of the SFO, just as Rudy was back then. He was the first dead person that I had seen in a funeral home. He evidently stayed with me in a number of ways. I think he was the beginning of my journey."

John had considered becoming a funeral director several times, but hadn't made a decision yet. Since graduation he hadn't used his NMU degree in social work due to local funding cuts in social service occupations. Now Mike Fassbender was asking for his help more and more often, so John left his flower shop position in favor of employment in the funeral trade. After a year of apprenticeship, Mike asked John if he'd ever considered going to mortuary school. He had, but now the decision he'd been putting off was forced upon him. With some further consideration and his parents' support, he returned to Northern for a year of what he calls "purgatorial chemistry." His language choices often

reflect his long-ago conversion to Catholicism. Then, in 1977, he left for the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science for an additional year of schooling. Through a series of events that stretched over years, John feels that his resolve to remain in the funeral business was periodically tested.

His initial trial was his first case at the onset of his apprenticeship at Fassbender's. That case was a burn victim who wasn't found until the house that blazed all around him was completely leveled. As a misshapen black body bag was unzipped in the funeral home preparation and embalming room, John faced the charred remains of a man's body burned far beyond recognition. The deceased was identifiable only with the aid of dental records. John said to himself, "Face it; you don't have to like it, but if you run, you will always run." He faced it head-on, created a mantra, and established a pattern of behavior that was repeated as he endured through the State of Michigan's mandatory apprenticeship cases that followed.

At the time, Michigan required an apprentice mortician, under the supervision of a licensed funeral director, to perform twenty-five embalmings and participate in twenty-five funerals with bereaved families. This requirement could be fulfilled either before or after formal training at mortuary school. John fulfilled the obligation before mortuary school, as do many students whose families are in the business. Bereavement counseling training was less common then than it is now. Today, large funeral operations with multiple locations have bereavement counselors who are available to meet with family members to discuss the grief process in detail. In smaller operations like Fassbender's, those duties are added to the extensive list of tasks and responsibilities performed by the funeral directors themselves. John's resolve was tested again in the course of his

mortuary school career. During the first month he was attending classes in Cincinnati, a major fire necessitated the school's students being called upon to assist with 165 victims of one of the worst catastrophes of its kind in American history.

On May 28, 1977, the Beverly Hills Supper Club in northern Kentucky caught fire due to faulty aluminum wiring. There were 2,400 patrons in the sprawling, multi-level building at the time. Numerous chairs burned, releasing toxic gas from foam seat cushions and inflating the death toll. One-hundred-sixty bodies were found in a single banquet room. Draped bodies were lined up on a basketball court in a nearby makeshift morgue where relatives came to make identifications. John and his classmates had heard the prolonged wail of sirens in the distance and called to inquire about their source. The students were asked if they'd return to school from a Memorial Weekend picnic to help with the aftermath of the tragedy. They all did. For John, the experience was mind-boggling in its enormity and sheer emotion.

He swivels in his desk chair, faces the westerly windows and the buildings across Third Street, glances out as if the white sheer curtains aren't there and says, "We saw families as they identified their loved ones, took care of the unidentifiable, and, in general, endured and were thankful when the whole task was over. Once again, I called upon my motto." Again, he faced duty head on. John and many others were quick to respond with assistance. Before the magnitude of September 11th altered our perception, the Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire was the third worst fire disaster in United States history. John also made the national news. His mother recognized him standing in a group as a television camera panned the outside of the armory where he was taking a break from work with the victims. Even this trial did not alter his decision. His course

was set. In 1978, John graduated from mortuary school, took his national and state boards, and returned to Marquette and the Fassbender Funeral Home.

Five years of work at the funeral home slipped by until October of 1983, when his father, John Oberstar, Sr., passed away of cancer. The elder John was surrounded by family at his passing in Marquette General Hospital. John left the hospital for the funeral home where he loaded the cot into the hearse. Back at the hospital, he removed his father's body and returned to the funeral home where he embalmed him. In 1988, he performed the same procedure for his mother. "Embalming one's parents is not for everyone, but for me it was cathartic," he says. A nearly silent sigh escapes. He continues, "Besides, my mom and I discussed my decision to embalm Dad. I maintained that since he paid for my education, he should derive something from it. The embalming was my way of removing what the world should not see."

He feels he was able to make his parents, both of whom were cancer victims, more presentable; he had acquired the ability to erase from public view the ravages of corruptive disease through the careful application of embalming makeup. Both parents were viewed in open caskets at their visitations. In performing those skills, in healing his parents' outward appearance, he began healing his own grief at their passing. It was the last thing that he could do for them.

"I worked both my parents' funerals and I'm glad I did. It all helped me come to grips with the reality and finality of death. I have a strong sense of an eternity and know that better places exist after this one. I am confident of that. Also, the experiences have made me, I believe, a better funeral director. Now I know what grief is, how it works, and how to cope with it." The loss of parents caused John to extend himself in the cultivation

of friendships. He spends time every week with Judy Donckers, James and Andi Goresky and their children, Myra and Steve Hansen, Father Leon Jarvis, and me. He appreciates and fosters the camaraderie of platonic relationships. Even when funeral home duties preclude get-togethers or call him away, we feel nurtured by our time spent with him. He makes us feel like his extended family.

John believes that we reinvent ourselves to varying degrees after the losses of loved ones, depending upon the relationship and attachment we had to the deceased. We must go on without that cared-for one's affection, companionship and counsel. Though we never forget them, we often are forced to adapt, to change, to grow stronger through the knowledge that that's what they'd want us to do. Loss and longing make some of us more resilient. He also believes that this process of reinvention becomes more difficult as we age and become less adaptable and more inflexible. Also, seeing death through the eyes of a more mature person, being that older individual, we may more deeply experience death's proximity. For many funeral directors, death feels near because of the size and closeness of their communities.

In a small town like Marquette, each case is a friend or a friend of someone that you know. On December 20, 1986, my mother called John to request that he remove her mother from the Acocks Medical Facility, an elder care institution where she'd passed away. Laid out in a golden-hued casket, John shipped my Lakota grandmother to Winner, South Dakota, where she was received by the Mason Funeral Home. The funeral directors at Mason then transported her forty-two miles to the Trinity Episcopal Church in Mission, South Dakota. Years earlier, in 1979, her husband, my grandfather, had been buried in Mission on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation, where they had lived nearly

all their lives. The local Episcopal priest performed a funeral service for my grandmother and burial beside grandpa in the Indian cemetery followed the next day. Grace Pearl Burnett Giroux was the first Indian whose remains John had shipped to a reservation. We'd not discussed our ethnic backgrounds so he didn't know about my American Indian heritage until he embalmed my grandmother. She had the brown skin and the facial bone structure that is perceived as distinctly Native American. John became interested in the many rituals surrounding the passing of Indians. In the nineties, he began to be contacted by local Native American families. Also in the nineties, Fassbender's was sold by Mike Fassbender to the owners of the Skradski and Skradski-Boyce Funeral Homes in Gladstone and Escanaba. Thereafter, John managed Fassbender's with very little intervention by the new owners. Jeff Waeghe, one of the owners, once said to me, "John *is* the Fassbender Funeral Home."

He often tells the story about one large, American Indian family in the area who called him when their matriarch walked on. The family was split between a group who practiced traditional spirituality and a very contemporary faction who had been completely assimilated into the dominant culture. It has been John's policy that families can perform any cultural ceremony in the funeral home that does not jeopardize the premises. The traditionals of this family built a sacred fire which embarrassed the group of moderns, one of whose members poured water on it, effectively dousing a flame that was meant to burn for four consecutive days. Not for the first time, John was thrust into the role of referee and peacemaker. This incident caused him to consider alternatives that he might discuss with Indian families in similar circumstances. We discussed the possibility of a line of large candles he could purchase to substitute for the sacred fire in

some instances. He continually contemplates service alternatives. Yet, he is careful not to assume that these replacements will be readily embraced in place of traditional practice.

As the hour of the visitation was nearing, another Indian family asked John if they might lay down a circle of cedar around the casket holding their loved one. As he always does, John agreed to another traditional custom. Ten minutes later several relatives were on their hands and knees carefully creating an unbroken circle of fresh, pungent cedar cuttings on the funeral home carpeting. John has no olfactory sensation; he's smelled nothing since he suffered a car accident head injury at age thirteen. But, enough people in the room commented on the tangy scent that John thought that this certainly added a natural, aesthetic element to the proceedings. It was not until the next day that he discovered that a four-foot column arborvitae at the corner of the funeral home had been nearly stripped bare for the cedar that adorned the casket base. In telling this story to each new audience, John never fails to add that the small tree flourished thereafter, growing back fuller and more lush than it had ever been.

John is very aware of the drawbacks associated with his profession. He sees his friends and their families grieving and the suffering can get very close and personal. In between phone calls he tells me, "There have been times when I've imagined other careers and been envious of those who have nine-to-five jobs. I'm often called out on weekends, holidays, in the midst of personal gatherings, and at other inconvenient times. Having lost my parents and been a mourning family member, I know that what I do has value and families appreciate the extra effort." That extra effort is normal procedure for John and his associate, Jeremy Hansen. John receives numerous requests from families and fulfills

those wishes constantly. I've accompanied him to family homes after funerals to deliver plants, flowers, Mass cards, sympathy cards, death certificates and anything else that he believes will, in some small way, ease the sorrow. In the upstairs kitchen while he eats lunch, Jeremy, who is also a licensed funeral director, tells me, "It took me about two years after I first began working here to understand all that John gave up to make this business his life. He sacrificed relationships. Maybe because in this environment, I see John more than I see my wife, I compare his involvement here to having a wife. I realize now that when John is difficult to work with it's because he has the best interests of a family in mind. He is trying to accomplish something for grieving relatives." John is consistent. Grieving families come first. He will always go out of his way for them, even if it gets in the way of his personal life. He has never married and once said to me, "I think we have a few things in common. We both probably would have eaten our young, if we'd had them." I don't believe he would have. And because he is equally devoted to the families and the funeral home itself, he cares for the premises as if it were his home.

Like many American homes, the Fassbender Funeral Home is tastefully decorated for the Christmas season. For years, John and Jeremy have put up a Christmas tree in the funeral home vestibule with an ornament bearing the name of each of the deceased that have passed through Fassbender's that year. Visitors often comment favorably when they see the eighty plus ornaments that adorn the tree each year. Families are invited to come and claim their loved one's memorial ornament after the new year begins. Some show up in June or July, and are gently handed their individual ornament retrieved from storage. They are always grateful for an additional memento.

John's life as a funeral director has been rewarding. "I have met some of the most interesting people around," he says. "For a few days in the life of a family, I am privileged to be drawn into their inner circle and share their history. I have never arranged a service for anyone that was completely good or completely bad. The majority have been fascinating and unforgettable characters. I often go to the various cemeteries to walk, ride my bike, or photograph the scenery. I pause and recall the stories of the people that have come into my life."

I frequent them now too. The Park Cemetery in Marquette has become a favorite place to sit and read, watch the ducks drift, lie in the grass and stare at the passing clouds and quietly write. It is pastorally immaculate. The ponds, trees, hills, gardens, fields and hundreds of memorial monuments are lovingly cared for by the sexton, local gardeners and the families of the deceased. I find myself there with John and without him. When he and I go together, he always shares a story or two.

Cemeteries are dense with stories. They are repositories for accounts of the past and family plots lay in wait, their monuments blank beyond dates of birth, as the histories of the living play out. Several years ago, John and I were having dinner, when he casually said, "I see your parents have bought drawers in the mausoleum at Holy Cross Cemetery."

"What?" I screeched, loud enough for other restaurant patrons near me to turn and gaze at me, wondering what precipitated that nails-on-the-blackboard shriek. Nothing he said convinced me. I'd never imagined my parents not laid to rest in the ground. It struck me as particularly odd that my Native American mother would agree to be shut behind a concrete and metal wall. Not until we were actually standing there, forty-five

minutes later, in front of the small plaques on the drawers stacked in the wall bearing my parents' names would I believe that they'd done this without even informing me after the fact. I wondered if it weren't for John, when I would have found out. I knew then that I shouldn't have doubted him. This was not something he'd joke about, even though he has a fine-tuned sense of humor that is regularly exercised. I was hurt and disappointed that my parents made these arrangements without even discussing them with my sister and me. But, at the same time, I was grateful for John's attention to detail. He'd been scanning the names inside the mausoleum one day when he happened across my parents'. He made no negative judgment or commentary during or after I finished my protracted ranting on the subject. He was and is a concerned friend, available, sensitive and level-headed. Those qualities serve him well in the funeral trade too.

John believes that he has benefited by working with some of the most talented, personable, and humorous people in the funeral industry. It is certainly a trade that begs for and appreciates humor. His personal brand of gallows humor includes his oft-repeated contention that when he goes, there will be no open casket. He has made his wishes well known to his employers. He's requested that they see to the cremation of his remains, and the casting of his ashes somewhere between Marquette and Trenary. For years he said, "No one will know where I am. I'll just be alongside the highway somewhere." But lately he's altered this viewpoint. He's been saying, "I've handled so many contaminated remains that the area where my ashes rest will glow, so you'll see me, in the ditch along US 41." His friends will have a final resting place to visit after all.

John welcomes everyone who visits the funeral home, aware that many cringe to enter. Some relax at his quick smile and easy manner. He's well known around town due to the public nature of his work beyond the embalming room, and because he is a longtime parishioner of St. Christopher's Catholic Church. He loves to talk and excels at melding a diverse group over a good meal. He always picks up the check for the group he dines with, number of guests and location notwithstanding, and he is a generous tipper. Over several of these meals, the subject of retirement has recently come up.

Unlike many his age, who express a longing to give up their careers, John has never conveyed a desire to abandon his life of service. He believes the adage that if you find a job you like, you will never work a day in your life. "I have worked very few," he says. Within the last year, however, he has begun to slow down a little. He's stepping away, gradually. Some of us are amazed. His friends judge his comfort in doing this as an indication of his implicit trust of Jeremy and are glad for it. Jeremy and the owners are working on a purchase contract that will eventually result in his owning Fassbender's. Recently, there've been a couple visitations at the home that John has not worked. Last year this would not have happened. I'm hearing from him more often now and am pleased with the minor shift in his priorities. We've seen a few movies lately, a form of entertainment he declined for years anticipating his beeper forcing him out of the theatre in the middle of a film. Not long ago, I was on my way to meet my sister for dinner when he called me. He asked if we'd like to join him at the Ramada Inn's Friday fish fry. We altered our plans and met him. I was surprised to hear that there were visitation and funeral services going on at the home throughout the evening. Jeremy and a friend of the

deceased were handling everything. John was where he wanted to be and I was spending time with two of my favorite people. I look forward to this trend continuing.

Peggie's Path

One may be of any race or of almost any religion and walk the Red Road. The Road is a path, away. Its full meaning is the way one acts, the methods one uses, and what directs one's doing. There is more to the Red Road than spoken word or written words on paper. It is behavior, attitude, a way of living, a way of "doing" with reverence – of walking strong yet softly, so as not to harm or disturb other life.

John Redtail Freesoul (Cheyenne-Arapaho)

Peggie talks about the Anishinaabe Creator in the same way that Christians honor Jesus Christ. She lives the belief system of her Anishinaabe relatives, walks the Good Red Road and trusts that Creator *is* goodness. She was mature with children of her own before her personal religious search came around full circle.

"All my life I searched for who I was, what I was. I knew I had to find out why I was drawn to a higher power. I always felt I had a sixth sense," she says. She is quiet, observant, like a white-tailed deer. Yet unlike the white-tail, she is naturally approachable, receptive. She risks openness, a trait that has strengthened her.

Often, when I think of her, I turn to look at the dreamcatcher that hangs near the door in my office. It's a visual touchstone, part of the pattern and web of Peggie's Ojibwe belief schema. Its presence shields and soothes me. She was working on it during the last meeting of a Native studies class she attended during the summer of 2004. I joined the class for a feast of local wild food and drink that they'd gathered and prepared. Along with several others, I drifted toward Peggie and sat to watch her delicate hands pull

sinew, wood and bead as the dreamcatcher took shape. She dipped her head, rested her chin on her upper chest and looked over her glasses at her work held high. This poor eyesight gesture is familiar to anyone who spends time with her. She casually offered a lesson to a growing group, answering questions as often happens when she creates her art. And she knows the stories now that accompany the work. She chooses among them carefully, accounting for audience and time of year, as is traditional. People want to listen.

As she neared completion of her project, I said, "Nice, Peg. I like that one."

She finished and pressed her work toward me.

"Oh no," I said, "I didn't mean that I wanted you to gift me," and I thought *I've complimented a traditional person and obligated them to give me something, again*. I'd backpedaled before on this road. I'd have to think more carefully before speaking, take another lesson from Peggie, who speaks with a soft constraint that I admire.

"It's a simple thing," she said. "I want you to have it. Really."

"Thanks," I sighed and smiled at her. The dreamcatcher has been nearby ever since.

Now, in the fall of 2006, she's back. She took a few semesters off over a year ago after attending Northern Michigan University for three years. She was missed by members of the Native American Student Association and her former coworkers at the Center for Native American Studies here on Northern Michigan University's campus. She anticipated the disappointment on my face before she told me she was leaving Marquette to live with her husband Fred and his Anishinaabeg relatives on the Keweenaw Bay

Indian Community reservation at Baraga, Michigan. We were in the NMU Bookstore and I gazed at her with what I hoped was my most compelling look of shocked disbelief. Her medium brown, gossamer hair cascaded over squared shoulders and a prominent forehead. She met my searching gaze directly through thick, yet stylish glasses.

"I'll be back," she said.

"*When* will you be back?" I countered, hoping that it sounded like a challenge, but she was on to me. We had both been through this with other students in the past, the disappointing news that someone in whom we saw great potential was leaving school. She smiled serenely, perceptive as usual and did not rise to the bait. She projected an *I know what I'm doing* attitude. And I'd believed that about her for some time now.

We met when we worked together for the Gateway Academic Program (GAP), a student mentoring group directed through the then Diversity Student Services office on campus. More recently, she was a pivotal planner of NMU's annual Learning to Walk Together Traditional Powwow, and I was a support person for her and other Native American Student Association members. We are older, near-in-age, American Indian college students. She was an almost perfect peer mentor when we worked in the GAP program. I watched her unflagging patience and common-sense approach to the drama shared with her by young students of color, and I learned from her. I was fascinated by her unruffled tranquility in a couple of hairy situations and in the process, became curious about her life. Mainly, I admired her personal weaving of serenity and passion, calm and commitment. She struck me as paradoxical, an enigma that I wanted to understand.

She was born Margaret Jo Homminga prematurely on November 6, 1953, at 3lb. 4oz. in War Memorial Hospital at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan.

"I was a survivor from birth," she says.

Her mother, Doreen, was an alcoholic who began drinking at twelve years of age and died of alcohol aspiration, the inhalation of vomited alcohol and stomach contents into the lungs causing asphyxiation, at age sixty-three. Peggie was a Prenatal Exposure to Alcohol baby, though one of the luckier ones. She was only affected by low birth weight, poor eyesight and marginal Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) as a result of her mother's drinking while she was pregnant. Other Native American children are not as lucky.

Peggie eventually researched Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and discovered that many experts believe that alcohol is the most common cause of mental retardation in the United States. She learned that American Indian infant populations are particularly impacted by FAS. The late Modoc Indian author, Michael Dorris and his Ojibwe wife, Louise Erdrich, also a celebrated author, campaigned along with Colorado Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell for a heightened American consciousness about FAS after Dorris discovered that a reservation infant that he'd adopted suffered from full-blown FAS. In the early nineties, the media began to characterize FAS as an "Indian problem" after statistics revealed that American Indian infants were many times more likely to be born with FAS than other minority babies. Indian people like Peggie were becoming more and more aware that ill infants born to alcohol consuming mothers were probably suffering from some form of FAS. Peggie was among those affected. Her realization that her health could be so much worse further attuned her to many things, the sacred and an occupational calling being among them.

Awareness of how her life was affected by substance abuse has been a crucial factor in Peggie's choice of career pursuit. Always inclined to medical and health related employment, she trained first as a nurse's aide and then as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). She entered Northern Michigan University to train as a Surgical Technician, but her poor eyesight critically impaired her ability to distinguish between similar instruments used in the operating room and she was forced to give up that dream. After reconsidering her major a handful of times at NMU, she has now settled on social science, which meets her overarching goal of serving her Indian community as a teacher after graduation. Her shifting focus on a major is partially due to her ADD, but it has also been a personal struggle to find the best way to give back to and uplift her Indian people, a common concern among Indian college students who are raised to consider community ahead of self. She hopes to work with families, to help them cope with and overcome the many social problems that continue to plague reservation existence. Her vivid memories as the daughter of an alcoholic mother and a partially absentee father have produced in her the desire to ease the pain of Ojibwe people who continue to suffer from numerous forms of social and familial devastation.

Peggie and her two younger brothers, John and Mike, lived with her parents, Doreen and Howard, until Peggie was four years-old. Her mother and father met in a bar in Sault Ste. Marie that Doreen cruised looking for attractive, white men with whom she disowned her Ojibwe heritage. This denial was common among assimilation reconciled Indian people for several generations, until the Indian pride movement of the late sixties. Doreen and Howard weren't married at the time, though they did marry in the 1980s, and her father

had another family in Jackson, Michigan, a legal wife with whom he'd fathered three sons. At first, while Howard was still married to his downstate wife, he came to Peggie and Doreen only on weekends and then more often after John and Michael were born.

"I was four when Doreen went on a drinking binge, leaving me alone with John and Michael, who were three and two at the time. I remember feeding the boys cereal with orange juice. At age four, I was more of a parent than my mother. I saw myself as the other parent along with my father," says Peggie.

Two weeks after the beginning of Doreen's alcohol binge, a social worker came to Peggie's home and removed all three siblings and placed them in a foster home where they remained for one lengthy week. For speaking her mind with this family, Peggie was locked in a closet several times over that week. She reacted by locking the foster dad who'd imprisoned her in an outhouse. However, only recently, decades later, has she overcome her fear of the dark that began in that foster family's closet. She continues to battle anxiety in small, enclosed spaces.

That placement situation not working out, Peggie and her brothers were transported from Sault Ste. Marie to Marquette and the multi-story, brick Holy Family Orphans Home that stands abandoned today at the southwest corner of Fisher and Altamont Streets. She was happy to be quartered on the ground floor of the huge, cavernous building with other younger children, while the older residents inhabited the upper floors. Peggie learned how to live as a Catholic from the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Agnes who supervised the orphanage at the time.

"I was always religious," she says. "I wanted to be a nun between the ages of nine and ten and then again when I was older. At age nine, I asked God for a sign. I wanted a statue to come alive and tell me that this was my path."

But the sign never came and as she matured she began to realize that Catholicism was not the religion of her heart. Several years later, when she saw Catholic worshippers dressing themselves in competition with their neighbors in the pews, she began to think that she might someday embrace a different spirituality. An increasingly disturbing void troubled her, as if her spiritual life was incomplete. The belief system she longed for did come to her later in life.

In August of 1958, when Peggie was almost five years of age, she and both her brothers were adopted by Robert and Dora Hoinowski of Iron River, Michigan. Dora, who was Italian, and Robert, who was Polish, were initially interested only in Michael, the youngest of the three siblings.

Four year-old Peggie said, "If you want Michael, you want all of us."

She was determined not to be separated from the boys. The Hoinowskis raised Doreen and Howard's children, hoping that it would be assumed that they were Italian, in an upper middle class setting where they wanted for nothing physically. But, Dora Hoinowski had a temper. Her spankings crossed the line into beatings. When Peggie was sixteen she missed curfew and arrived home late from a date with a boy; Dora was furious. She stood on Peggie's throat, choking her and accusing her of having sexual relations, calling her a bad girl. Peggie knew it wasn't true, she wasn't immoral, but Dora

feared her adopted children's Indian heritage was influencing their behavior. Peggie long ago forgave Dora for the abuse she inflicted.

"They did the best they could," she says of the Hoinowskis.

In 1973, when Peggie was nineteen, she was raped by a man she had known all her life. He was a local acquaintance of her family, a predator in his fifties. He offered her a ride home and she took it gratefully, having no reason to distrust him. The distance covered was long and the terrain desolate.

"C'mon, you can sit here by me," he said as he motioned her nearer.

She refused. He pulled into a deserted area and forced himself on her. When he'd finished, she scrambled out of the car and walked home. She never told anyone. The threats he abused her with were the same lies that rapists have always used to silence their victims. The sexual assault remained her toxic secret for twelve years, coming out only when she was admitted to Marquette General Hospital after a suicide attempt. At the time of the rape, she still wanted to be a nun and subsequently judged herself unworthy for having been sexually tainted. She could no longer be a virgin bride of Jesus Christ. But, Peggie turned this horror to her advantage.

"It was divine intervention," she says. "I was not meant to be a nun. I am eagle clan and they are the spiritual people of the tribe, but I didn't know that until I met my current husband."

Two years later in 1975, Peggie married her first husband, a man of full-blooded Danish descent.

"We were married for sixteen wonderful years and had four beautiful daughters," she says. "Then on April 3, 1990, I was startled awake by a hand over my mouth and my husband hissing into my ear, 'We are being bugged.' That was the beginning of the nightmare. My husband was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic at Newberry State Mental Hospital in Newberry, Michigan."

Peggie and her family had been financially set and well-adjusted, happy. Then for almost a year she told all the medical workers she was employed with that her husband was mentally ill. But, he hid it well. No one believed her. It was only when he was alone with Peggie that his deteriorating mental condition surfaced. With everyone else, he concealed the progressive disorder. No one believed her until he openly threatened her while brandishing a shovel in front of his own coworkers. That episode forced her to begin considering divorce from the husband that she still loved. She thought divorce might protect her daughters from their increasingly violence prone father.

Then another incident.

The love of her life tried to kill her by recklessly driving a vehicle in which she was a passenger. When he finally stopped the car, Peggie got out and walked away from him – left him for good. She obtained a restraining order to keep him away from their home and started divorce proceedings. Heartbroken and despondent, she attempted suicide a second time because she believed she had married until death and she could not imagine living without her husband.

"I knew if I stayed with him, I was going to die. In between suicide attempts, I felt off and on as though I couldn't die. I was a survivor. Years later, I was told by a fellow patient in Marquette General Hospital that he recognized the survivor in me. I was

abandoned by my parents, abandoned by my husband. But it wasn't until my third suicide attempt that I threatened God and asked him to show me that he exists. Within a minute, two eagles, my clan animals, flew over me. One lit in a birch tree and chattered at me. I felt that this was the Creator telling me that he wanted me to go on. I knew then that I was going to live; I was *not* going to die. I finally chose to live my life. I went to a behavioral therapy hospital in Menominee. At the same time, I was a cutter, slashing myself to release pain, I now understand. At the hospital in Menominee I finally told my whole story. The staff listened and taught me how to change my ways of thinking and how that changed thinking would alter my behavior." In the meantime, two of Peggie's daughters had chosen to live with their father while he was being treated for his illness and two remained with her. She mourned her fragmented family, but resolved to go on.

During this first marriage, on April 24, 1982, Peggie was reunited with her maternal parents. She was twenty-nine. They remained in contact for the next eleven years. When her mother first approached her, she thought how much they looked like one another. Peggie had questions about her childhood that only her mother could answer. She had long wondered about the existence of photographs of her and the boys. Had Doreen or Howard loved them enough to take their pictures? Even though Doreen provided photographs and tried to reconcile with her daughter, Peggie resented her mother. Bitterness still edges her voice when speaking about Doreen. The woman who drank her children away was not the parent whom Peggie was interested in reconnecting with. Rather, her abiding love and forgiveness was focused on Howard, who eventually gave up his downstate Michigan family for Doreen and a chance with his upstate family.

"I wanted my Dad," she says. "When I saw my Dad, I cried. I went into his arms and I cried and cried. I had such a love affair with my Dad and he was so handsome. I always wanted to know if I was loved."

Eleven years later, as Peggie's mental state was improving with the help of behavioral therapy, she was forced to deal with more loss. In February, April, and October of 1993 the last three of her four remaining parents died and she felt abandoned again. Her adopted father had passed away years before when Peggie was nine years-old. She felt deserted and orphaned with each parent's passing. She missed being a daughter and grieved the loss of supportive elders.

In March of 1994, Peggie went to Watersmeet to apply for a job at the original Lac Vieux Desert Casino. She was hired as a snack shop employee and it was there that she met her current husband, Fred Shelifoe, whom she calls Freddie, and was embraced by the local Ojibwe people. It felt surreal to her. She'd come home as an outsider and had much to learn.

Immediately after beginning work in the casino, Peggie began asking people she worked with about her background. She was told that she should speak to Fred Shelifoe who had worked Security at the casino for three years, that he would answer the questions whirling in her mind.

Fred was a former Marine who had served in Vietnam and had been married twice and fathered four children in a third relationship for a total of twelve offspring. His eldest, a son also named Fred, had died in his arms, the victim at age sixteen of a drunk driver. The four youngest were in foster homes after having been taken from their drug

addicted mother. Not surprisingly, Fred had vowed never to marry again. His two wives had died and the mother of his last four children was mentally ill, her condition possibly induced by substance abuse. Fred believed his temper had been detrimental in these relationships and he did not want to harm another woman.

Gradually, Fred and Peggie spoke to one another more and more at the casino. He told her that he recognized her as a Native woman the first time that he saw her. That touched her, made her smile. She hadn't thought of herself as appearing Indian to anyone and she liked the idea. It fit, felt right, and gave her a sense of belonging, of being in the right place. Peggie didn't want to get involved with another man, yet she was interested in Fred's sensitivity and insight and she wanted to learn about her people from him. She was drawn to his way of teaching Ojibwe cosmology. They began to date even though both had sworn off intimate relationships. The first time they were in one another's company outside the casino, Fred taught Peggie how to respectfully ask a favor of a traditional Indian person. He carefully explained the gift offering of tobacco prior to a request, in this case, for information about her culture, heritage and background. She didn't know any better and he hadn't said, so she brought him chewing tobacco instead of smoking tobacco. She laughs at herself about this still. She remembers these times well. She was just beginning to learn the cultural and spiritual life ways of her people, customs and conduct that she would soon live by.

Fred is rich in Ojibwe knowledge and he was happy to share teachings with this attractive woman eleven years his junior who was so eager to learn. They hadn't known one another very long when Fred asked Peggie for a favor. He was having vehicle problems and needed a ride. Though still wary of men, Peggie decided to trust her

instincts and agreed to take him home. As soon as Fred was seated in Peggie's car, he laid tobacco on her dashboard and sang four songs in Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabeg, the Three Council Fires people comprised of the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi. Peggie was perplexed and uncomfortable at first, unsure of what Fred was doing and what he hoped to accomplish. Yet, at the same time, the words of the songs were hauntingly familiar.

"I can remember washing dishes when I was ten and singing Native songs that my grandmother had sung to me before I was four years-old," she says. Fred's singing acted as a mnemonic device, flooding her with early childhood memories.

"You are now beginning your journey on the Red Road," Fred told her at the completion of his prayer songs.

Peggie didn't fully understand this statement but her trust in Fred was evolving. When they arrived at his house and she stepped inside, the first thing she noticed was that he had the same window curtains that were in her home. She looked around his old, worn residence and noticed a shadow box hanging on a wall. She moved nearer to it and couldn't believe her eyes. It was the same white, three-tiered shadow box with gold gilt edging that Dora had had on the wall for many of the years while Peggie was growing up in Iron River. These seeming coincidences drew Peggie closer to Fred. For her, they were signs. They had some simple things in common. What else might there be?

Later in their relationship, Fred told Peggie about meeting a woman in a bar years before who had told him that she had three children who weren't living with her. She said that she knew they were somewhere in the Iron River area and that she intended to get

them back. Fred believes that that woman was Doreen and that meeting her was his first contact with Peggie.

Since Peggie had taken a position in the Security Department where Fred worked, they were forced into a clandestine relationship because the casino had regulations against employees that worked in the same department dating one another. Fred had a home movie of a powwow that he wanted Peggie to see because she had never attended this most common and open of Native ceremonies. He was hoping she'd be interested enough to want to take one in. They cautiously met so that Peggie could view the film. Not far into the footage, she was stunned to see a girlhood friend, Robelle, dancing in full regalia. While watching Robelle dance and hearing powwow music that uplifted her heart, she recognized the spiritual connection among the participants and observers. This was part of the Red Road Fred had talked about. She needed to go to a powwow as soon as possible.

Peggie and Fred attended the Escanaba Powwow in 1994 and slept in a tent near a stand of whispering trees that canopied the line of tents below. Peggie spent the weekend smiling among the people she now thought of as her own. Her bond with them was stronger than ever. When they returned to work, both were suspended for three days for calling in sick and openly attending the powwow. They were excited. They had three unexpected days to spend together. Peggie has been dancing with her family, embracing her community at powwows ever since.

They dated from 1994 into the first half of 2001, during which time Fred steadfastly refused to marry again. Peggie knew that they were meant to be together as husband and wife. She rationalized her position to Fred over and over again. But, Fred

knew he had a temper and he realized that he was verbally abusive on occasion. He continued to avoid marriage. Then both were diagnosed with diabetes, a disease that has reached epidemic proportions among American Indian people. Their joint diagnoses caused both to consider how relatively brief life is and how important a dependable life partner can be, particularly in times of illness. Shortly thereafter, Fred was advised by a fellow former combat Marine to look into treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He began treatment and that therapy has had a stabilizing influence on his and Peggie's relationship. Peggie is the only woman who has remained with Fred through good and bad and now he was convinced too. They belonged together as wedded partners. They were married twice in 2001, the first time in June in a mainstream, Anglo American service and the second time in August in a traditional Anishinaabe ceremony. They've been teased by an Indian friend that it should have been the other way around – the spiritual ceremony first and then the secular service.

Later that same year, Fred experienced an on-the-job accident. A falling tree angled through an open vehicle he was driving and slammed down onto the top of his hand. Layers of skin were torn and peeled back exposing tendons and bone. Peggie insisted that she remain in the examining room while the doctor stitched Fred's hand. As it turned out, she aided the physician by handing him suturing paraphernalia during the procedure. Later, both the doctor and Fred encouraged Peggie to school herself as a Surgical Technician. She eventually applied to the program offered at NMU and she and Fred moved to Marquette where Peggie began school. At Northern she continued to search for and build a community of support for herself, a group that she could care about

and look after. And she continued to build a spiritual circle through new relationships with Indian students and Native university employees.

Peggie has returned to Northern to continue her studies. Fred chose to remain with his ancestral people and his dog on the reservation in Baraga, though he drives to Marquette every weekend. Peggie lives in a campus townhouse with her daughter Megan and her granddaughter Isabella, Bella to all of us. Peggie and Megan attend classes and they share care of lively Bella. I asked Peggie if she will be attending the annual Native American Women's Gathering on Mackinac Island the fourth weekend in September.

"I don't think it's going to work out for me this year," she said smiling. "I have Bella for four hours on Friday while Megan is in class. It will be the first time that I've missed the gathering in years, but if the Creator wants me to, I'll be there."

I'll miss her companionship and beading expertise if she isn't on the island with us, but I know she'll be where she should be. Though I don't see her as often as I used to at campus functions, she *is* where she belongs, dependable and steady, encircled in the haven of family and home. Peggie's relations and the kinship connections that she maintains so well are her congregation in a thriving spiritual belief system. She has never been stronger. It's all there, in the confident serenity of the curve of her mouth, in her clear-eyed, smiling gaze. Her Red Road weaves out, widening and gathering, braiding around many who appreciate it and her. I am fortunate to be one of the many.

Ghost Follower

Thus when I come to shape here at this table between my hands the story of my life and set it before you as a complete thing, I have to recall things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that and become part of it; dreams, too, things surrounding me, and the inmates, those old half-articulate ghosts who keep up their hauntings by day and night... shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves.

Virginia Woolf

"I got married in a cemetery," Maryanne says in a tranquil New York accent. "What did your ex-husband think of that?" I ask. "Oh, nothing, really. He kind of expected it. He knew how much time I spent in the Quaker cemetery at Beth Page, Long Island. I hung out there often, picking up and cleaning the grounds because it seemed like no one else did. People like me are called taphophiles. We are endlessly interested in funerals, graves, and cemeteries. We like grave stone rubbings, art and histories of death, and are sometimes interested in the deaths and burial sites of famous people. For years I have wanted to go to Highgate Cemetery in London to see Karl Marx's grave and many others there."

Cemeteries are a social history of the families who lived near them. They generally reveal the deceased's connection to place and sometimes to military service and/or religious belief. Highly architectural and botanically dazzling cemeteries are visited by millions every year, as are thousands of local memorial parks by lesser numbers of family members and the curious. Maryanne and I are fascinated by

cemeteries. Once again, I think of how much we have in common and how much we don't.

We met when she was a student in one section of the Native American Experience class that I taught at Northern Michigan University in fall of 2005. She sat near the front, a reliably present, intensely attentive and responsive student. It wasn't until well into the semester that she informed me that she is partially deaf and sits near instructors to read their lecturing lips. I'd wished I'd known sooner. The last few weeks of the class concentrates on the Red Power Movement and American Indian activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Maryanne is fascinated by this era of Indian history and has encouraged me to consider teaching a focus course on activism. She asked me recently if I would help her with a chapter startup of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee here in Marquette, Michigan, a group she's worked with for some time. I told her that I'd be happy to help. Our mutual Native American activism kept us in one another's company working on various projects after the class ended and eventually Maryanne registered for my History of Indian Boarding School Education class.

Maryanne was born in East Meadow, Long Island, New York, on May 23, 1956. She was given up into foster care at birth and was adopted seventeen months later by Jean and Edmund Uffer of Farmingdale, Long Island. Though her adoptive father was German, she was raised as an Italian, her adoptive mother Jean's ancestry. Her long, black hair that she finger combs often from her face makes her look as though she might be Italian. She

is a study in black, almost always wearing black pants and flowing black shirts over her short, buxom figure. Only once, in the three years I've known her, have I seen her not wear black. Her only son graduated from NMU in May of 2007, and scanning the seating looking for my own family, I spotted Maryanne. She was radiant in a long, blazing white dress, an ebony current of hair drifting over her shoulders, and a proud mother's smile lighting her face. She appeared younger, more carefree.

Shortly after we met, she told me she'd been interested in the paranormal for a long time. Recently I asked her how that interest had developed and if it was somehow connected to her concerned awareness of Native America. She shared much, beginning her story when she was still a teen, over thirty years ago.

When Maryanne was nineteen years-old, her friend Linda rented a house on Long Island and called her, inviting her to come see it on a cold fall evening. She had an ulterior motive. After the house tour, Maryanne sat in the living room talking to her companion when she felt something blow past the side of her head, ruffle her hair once, then again, and yet another time. She looked around attempting to locate the source of the draft, but didn't say anything initially; she didn't want to scare her friend. Innately, Maryanne knew what it was.

"There was someone there, a presence," she said, relating the incident to me.

"What's wrong?" Linda asked at the time.

"Nothing," Maryanne answered several times until her curiosity finally won out over her concern about frightening her friend.

"Okay, what's going on in this house?" she asked.

"I wanted you here to see if you felt it too," Linda said. "If you really want to see what it is, just look into the kitchen."

"I looked that direction and saw the ghost of a girl standing in the room. She looked like a film negative, you know, black and white in reverse, about twelve years-old, wearing a light-colored dress, hair in pigtails. She stood perfectly still just looking at us. I searched her face trying to look into her eyes. A cold sadness came over me. That was the beginning of my career, I guess I'd say a calling. I had to know more about this. I stared at her until she was just gone. That was the beginning of it all."

This sighting is a type of clairvoyance. Clairvoyance is a form of extra sensory perception (ESP) or what is more commonly called the sixth sense.

Maryanne explained that her friend had rented the house as is, completely furnished, as if the people who lived there had departed suddenly, leaving belongings behind. After they'd seen the girl in the kitchen, Linda showed Maryanne a room lined with books, a library. The largest portion of the collection was texts about the Third Reich, the Nazis, and Hitler. Linda opened a closet door in the room, pulled a shoebox out, lifted the top off. Stacks of photographs lined the box. A snapshot of the little girl was among them.

"Oh, my God, that's her!" cried Maryanne.

"Yes," said Linda, "and for some reason she doesn't like this room. She always closes the library door."

In the few months that Linda lived in the house before she changed jobs and moved away, she asked neighbors about previous tenants and owners of the house but only learned that tenants came and went fairly often. Linda wasn't frightened by the little

girl; she felt she was good company. The landlord acted like he didn't know what she was talking about when Linda asked him what might be happening in the house. She inquired about the little girl in particular and he acted as though he knew nothing. The house seemed untouched as far as the furnished belongings, as if no one wanted to disturb anything inside.

"Linda got used to hearing the sounds of movement, cupboards closing, foot falls moving across the floor. She had a positive feeling about the presence, so she stayed until her job took her out of the area," Maryanne said. "When she was packing to leave, she saw the little girl and it looked as if she was crying. Linda said her goodbyes to the girl after explaining why she was leaving. I moved shortly after too. I wasn't really investigating the paranormal yet, but I became more aware and paid closer attention to rumors and sightings. If I heard that a place might be haunted, I'd go there and take pictures. And I hung out in cemeteries. I created a photography album that I call The Book of the Dead that's filled with cemetery pictures. As time went by, I became more interested in things connected with the dead."

Like Linda did regarding the little girl ghost, Maryanne conveys a positive sensitivity about the ultimate state and final resting place of those who have passed away. She attaches heightened sentiments of benevolent concern to both the condition of death and to places where the dead are laid to rest.

For some time, Maryanne has been concerned about an abandoned cemetery on a wedge of land near the outskirts of Marquette at the intersections of Route 553 and Pioneer Road. She says some local residents call it the baby cemetery. She shivers as she tells me this appellation because even though death in general fascinates her, she

struggles with and shies away from the death of infants and toddlers. The death of babies makes Maryanne squeamish. I've been familiar with this former cemetery since I was a child. My family lived very near it. We played on the corner as children and I picked large bouquets of lily of the valley that grew in profusion around the sunken depressions of emptied graves and abandoned monuments the day before my wedding years ago. All the remains had been moved long ago we were told.

Maryanne feels that this hallowed ground is not being cared for as it should be. "Respect is important always for the dead and for cemeteries," she says. "That's why I pick up and clean cemeteries. Some people look at cemeteries as if they are just land with dead bodies underground, but they're more than that to me. It's holy ground and this way of thinking is similar to the feelings that Native Americans have for burial grounds. Since I was ten years-old, I have been interested in many things Native American. I have always respected the earth, plants, and animals as Indians do. Death is part of the earth. It's our going back, so we have to respect the earth."

As fascinating as the story of the little girl ghost is, I felt compelled to ask Maryanne if that was the only influence she experienced that spawned her interest in the paranormal and death. She says, "No, that wasn't the only thing. In third grade I went to St. James Catholic School in Seaford, New York, and the classroom I sat in faced the back of the Catholic Church. I watched the comings and goings of funerals all day." The social and communal nature of funerals fascinates many of us. Children, in particular, are inquisitive

about this subject that is often not spoken of by adults. Maryanne's youthful curiosity is common.

"And later, when I was eighteen, six members of the DeFeo family, father, mother and four of five children, were murdered in the Amityville House – the house about which the horror film was made. It was fifteen minutes from the house I lived in for twenty-five years. The Lutz family moved in thirteen months after the DeFeo murders and after twenty-eight days left the house claiming to have been terrorized by paranormal behavior. It hit the news and everyone descended on the house. Crowds filled the streets. I was among them," said Maryanne. This haunting cemented her interest in the otherworldly, the supernatural.

When she became computer savvy, she joined groups online that were interested in death and memento mori, keepsakes that remind humans of their mortality and the eventuality of their death. Memento mori include skulls, hair of the dead, skeletons, and the like.

Jean Uffer always considered Maryanne to be a very high-spirited child. Maryanne recalls having often said, "When the spirit moves me or if the spirit moves me, then I'll go or do whatever." She believes she fought the ways the Uffers raised her and always imagined that she was acting and reacting more as her biological parents would have, rather than just accepting the ways of her adoptive parents. And she was a dreamer.

"Around age twelve I began to dream of a piece of land," Maryanne says. "I still see it in my dreams. It's located in the northeastern United States. I also dreamed of the Seneca people.

"Why am I dreaming about Seneca people?' I asked my Mom. "I don't know Indian people. Why am I having this dream? I still believe if I go to meet the Seneca in their land that I will find the property that I continue to dream about." Her dreams overflowed into her waking hours and she became a daydreaming child too, a child attached to and aware of the strength of the natural world.

"I could often be found in a tree. An apple tree in my yard was my retreat as a child. I'd go there when I was upset and depressed and draw energy from that tree. I called the tree my grandmother. In summer when the trees were in full leaf, my mom would call to me because she couldn't see me in the tree. I was near her, hidden by leaves and branches. I'd be wedged among the branches, head back, staring at the sky. When my father cut that tree down, I cried my eyes out. My family thought that I was crazy. But I felt as though I pulled energy from that tree and had lost a power source."

Hauntings, Séances, and Channeling

Eventually Maryanne joined a group called the Paranormal Research Team (PRT) in Marquette. During the time she was a member, an NMU student made a film about the group's efforts. Along with PRT associates, Lori Burns, then the sales and marketing director for The Landmark Inn, a historic hotel in Marquette, was also interviewed for the film since it is common knowledge that The Landmark is haunted. In due course, Maryanne asked Lori if PRT could investigate The Landmark and Lori, captivated by the

idea, responded in the affirmative. Michelle Cook, a later director of sales, told Maryanne that The Landmark's business increased when word went out on the internet of the hotel's haunting. Maryanne laughed with me at internet speculation that it's Amelia Earhart who haunts The Landmark.

"Isn't that stupid?" she asked.

Much of Maryanne's current efforts regarding the paranormal are poured into an annual event called *Crossings: Tales of November* that's held on the weekend closest to Halloween at The Landmark. *Crossings* began as a circle of interest that included local author Fred Stonehouse, Lori Burns, Pat Black, Director of the Marquette County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Maryanne. Stonehouse has authored thirty books on maritime history, many of them focusing on the Great Lakes and shipping including *Haunted Lakes*, *Haunted Lake Erie, Haunted Lake Huron,* and most recently, *Haunted Lake Michigan*. Pat Black is interested in events that will draw people and money into the Marquette area. Lori and Fred began discussing the possibility of organizing a weekend of ghost stories and Maryanne and Pat were invited to join the conversation for their expertise. In the process, Maryanne talked about and then invited Keith Norton, a medium who lives in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, to come to Marquette in July of 2006 to perform a séance and to view The Holy Family Orphanage that is also known to be haunted.

Mediums experience and tell others about contacts with spirits of the dead and other non-living entities like angels. They also facilitate communication between less attuned people and spirits. Native people associate mediums with Namers – those among

our people who communicate with the dead through dreams and receive names for the living from ancestors to whom they are related.

Fred, Lori, Pat, Maryanne, and Keith ventured out together on a Friday evening to visit the orphanage. Keith's visit then became reason enough to expand the weekend into visits to a number of other local haunted sites. Pat said that this weekend with Keith would either make or break the preliminary planning of the *Crossings* event. Lori and Pat wanted to hang out with Keith to watch him work and to see how things went with the ghost stories weekend in mind. During the orphanage visit, Keith made contact with the ghost of a frightened little boy who has been seen repeatedly by a number of people usually on the building's south side near the staircase. He followed the child whose age he approximated at six years around the grounds and though he attempted to communicate with him, the boy has never spoken to anyone. Keith believes the boy's name is Anthony.

Saturday the group reconvened for breakfast and then toured the Tilden Mine plant interior in Ishpeming partially in preparation to view the memorial site in Diorite, Michigan, of the Barnes-Hecker Mine. It was here that fifty-one miners drowned in a mud and water cave-in on November 3, 1926. Keith was very aware of heightened energy at this location. Throughout the day, Fred told regional stories. Then they drove to rural Morgan Heights on the outskirts of Marquette and the former location of the Acocks Medical Facility. The multi-story, long term care center has been torn down but passable underground tunnels that were used by Acocks' staff still exist. Keith stood scanning the area and said, "I see souls wandering all around here." This was what the other members of the group had been waiting to hear.

A pair of local residents came out of their home near the premises to greet and talk with the group and one of them, a young man, escorted them below, through the tunnels. He assured the group that the passageways were not dangerous.

"I've been down here before," Pat said abruptly, halting all conversation. She explained that she felt as though she'd pushed patient-laden gurneys through the tunnels on a number of occasions. Pat knew that she had no actual memory of ever having been in the underground network but she was suddenly overwhelmed by feelings of familiarity with the location and blurted out her reaction. Keith revealed that perhaps what Pat was feeling was a residual haunting.

"It's like rewinding a tape and an event happening in a particular place over and over again," he explained. He felt Pat must have walked through a residual haunting and felt as if she were a medical worker pushing a gurney in the tunnel where that had happened thousands of times when the facility was operating.

Maryanne was concerned about Keith. As she watched him interact, she thought he looked tired. She wanted him to rest before the séance that was planned for that night at the Marquette Lighthouse. It was one of the original reasons for Keith having come to Marquette. The group disbanded so Keith could have a break before performing a séance for Fred with a very specific maritime purpose in mind.

Along with other mariners, Fred had been attempting to locate the Lake Superior shipwreck of the *Henry B. Smith* for years. The *Henry B. Smith* was a steel steamer that was transporting 11,000 tons of iron ore when she went down in foul weather while steaming toward the Keweenaw on November 9, 1913. Fred's hope was that the séance might shed light almost a century later on the location of the Smith which was one of the

largest carriers on the Great Lakes when she went down. Since séances are generally performed after dark, the group reassembled at 10:00 p.m. at the lighthouse. The Marquette Lighthouse is owned by the Coast Guard but can be visited through the Marquette Maritime Museum. As president of the board of the Maritime Museum, Fred gave permission for use of the lighthouse as a venue, though the get-together was kept secret. Fred initially felt that he could not participate because he was running for public office and feared that if his participation became public knowledge it would hurt his election chances.

The first séance was a failure. One of the persons involved feared the experience which effectively blocked a successful encounter. The next day Keith and Maryanne met Pat in her office.

"I'd like to have another séance but only with the people I name," Keith said. Fred decided to participate this time and the second séance began at 10:00 p.m. on Sunday evening at the Upper Michigan Motors Corporation building on Washington Street that now houses Marquette County Convention and Visitors Bureau. This séance had a singularly dissimilar outcome.

"Keith began by slipping into a trance and channeling the *Henry B. Smith's* captain, James Owen," Maryanne said. "Fred questioned the captain through Keith who acted as a bridge between two men in two different worlds. Palms down on the table to ground himself, Fred talked to the captain as if they were longtime friends."

"I have been looking for your ship for a very long time. Can you tell me what happened on the night of November 9th?" Fred asked. He appeared perfectly comfortable as he calmly questioned the long-dead mariner.

"I had to leave that night because my work was being questioned," Owen said. He had been behind company scheduling often that season and was being pressured to bring the ship in on time. Instead of staying in port during a churning northwester, he pressed on out into the big lake.

The ship was thought to have gone down near Big Bay. Captain Owen told Fred that she made it past Big Bay and then beyond the first lighthouse which was in the Keweenaw. Owen was steaming for an inlet where he knew he'd find safety when he realized that they couldn't make it. The ship went down and he lost all his men. Fred asked him where they were.

"We're in a 600 foot hole at the bottom of the lake," Owen said. Pat then told Fred that Granite Island had come into her mind and the thought of it remained with her. Fred left the circle to fetch a map and returned with the announcement that a deep trench ran along the lake bed just off Granite Island. Fred was now convinced that he knew where the *Henry B. Smith* still lies. He began making plans for a search the following summer in that area that he hoped would locate the wreck. He said that the National Geographic Society would become involved if he needed them. Fred has served as an "on-air" expert for the National Geographic Society and maintains contact with them. He told Keith and Pat that he'd like to have them with him when he finds the shipwreck.

Keith proceeded to channel another victim of the *Henry B. Smith* who jumped from the sinking ship. This man drowned and his body was carried north by currents and wind. He was eventually found frozen in a block of Lake Superior ice.

The next summer Fred was unable to investigate the *Smith's* location because he spent the season aboard ships in his capacity as a nautical historian. His services have

been increasingly in demand since he served as a consultant for both the Discovery Channel and A&E TV Network. Maryanne maintains that Fred has become the go-to guy concerning Great Lakes information.

All agreed that Sunday's séance was a rousing success. These proceedings encouraged and spurred the efforts of the planners of *Crossings*.

Crossings: Tales of November

Crossings: Tales of November is an annual weekend of spiritual workshops and ghost tours based on paranormal investigations in Marquette, tarot and palm readers, numerology, crystal readers, haunted hayrides, a secret séance, and the wrap-up masquerade ball at The Landmark Inn. The original organizing board consisted of seven people with Maryanne being a pivotal planner. The Landmark Inn was filled with energy throughout the first *Crossings* weekend. The Landmark's ghost, the woman in white, was seen several times. She is most often encountered on the sixth floor, but this particular weekend she was all over the building.

"She wears Edwardian period clothing and she was seen looking out over the lake. The mediums felt that she had lost a lover to the lake and continues to wait for his return," Maryanne said.

About four hundred people participated in all the events. One hundred and fifty people attended the first concluding ball. The planners considered it a triumphant. Christine Pesola, owner of the Landmark, called Pat Black the Monday morning following *Crossings* to tell her she hoped the event would happen again the following year. So, Maryanne also planned the second annual *Crossings*. She formed the Upper

Peninsula Paranormal Society to arrange future events. The second year organizers also worked with Shadow Watchers, the Escanaba area paranormal group. *Crossings* takes place during Halloween week and was larger its second year. Authors, magicians, mediums, and witches abounded in greater numbers. Some local Christian groups fought *Crossings* calling it a satanic event. Maryanne told everyone that *Crossings* has nothing to do with Satanism.

"Satanists don't believe in an afterlife, so this could not possibly be a satanic event," she explained. She maintained that an abiding belief in the ability of Keith and other mediums to channel the dead and speak with them from their afterlife precludes *Crossings* having anything to do with Satan.

"A lot of us that are involved in paranormal investigation are old souls," Maryanne said. I see that antiquity in her sparkling eyes often. Yet, she is both, at times a playful child, then, that old soul, primal and elemental in her action orientation and her compelling vision. She is a fundamental believer in a parallel existence of spirits and ghosts around us. It is these old souls that perceive them and reach out to them in a realm beyond our own.

Part Two

Native Women's Gatherings
Mackinac Island

Memoir seeks a permanent home for feeling and image,
a habitation where they can live together in harmony.

Patricia Hampl

The Gathering

A switching brown tail lured me, conjuring childhood memory of times with horses and sparking thoughts of beautiful things made by our people with horsetail hair. The powerful horse attached to the magnetic, graceful sway of tail was our taxi carriage's power source. Horse-drawn wagons of varying sizes and shapes, along with bicycles, are the foremost conveyances on non-motorized Mackinac Island. To our taxi driver's hulking backside I inquired, "How many horses work on the island?"

In the twist of his silhouette as he turned to answer, I was struck by the familiarity of his facial profile even though his coloring was medium to light.

"About four hundred, at the peak of the season."

"Who cares for them?"

"There's a staff of handlers and one of the owners of Mackinac Island Carriage Tours is a veterinarian and equine specialist," he said, rotating further on his wooden seat to make eye contact with me, while managing the reins.

"Where do the horses come from? Where do they spend the winter?"

"They're all owned by one family. The herd numbers around two thousand. Part is open pastured near Pickford, Michigan, and part is kept in Illinois. Both locations support large barns and a staff of equine handlers."

At a lull in the conversation, he asked, “What’s going on at the Boy Scout barracks?”

“We’re here for a gathering of Native American women,” I said.

“Oh, really?” he said. “I’m Native American.”

“What’s your tribal affiliation?” I asked, smiling to myself.

“Soo Tribe.”

I’d known he was Native. It was there, in the contours of his face, in the arrangement of eye and cheek. More and more, I looked into half-blood faces and felt a bond of commonality, an intrinsic relation. I asked his name, recognized it as the surname belonging to an ancient, prominent family living in the Sault St Marie area. Names, hidden or legendary, old or new, mean much to us, even as we reinstall them to mark accomplishment and transformation and watch some waver and fail. They are like us, everywhere, all around.

The annual Native American Women’s Gathering on Mackinac Island had been tugging at me for years. At almost 7:00 a.m., during my last fix for a personal addiction to the Weather Channel, April Lindala knocked on my door and fifteen minutes later we were on the road.

The lush, tree-sheltered landscape of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula skidded past the windows of April’s Ford Bronco as the three hour drive to the ferry departure point at St. Ignace swept by. April was talkative and after I’d drunk half of a large Starbucks’

Guatemala Antigua, so was I. The Weather Channel forecast spilled forth, my effortless recitation. “The weather powers-that-be are predicting cloudless sun and seventy degree temperatures throughout the weekend. It looks like it’ll be warm for the third weekend in September – just right for all the outdoor activities planned,” I said.

“We haven’t always been lucky,” April said. “It’ll be great to have good weather, if we do. We’ve done things in the pouring rain before.” She’d shared in several past gatherings and others like it elsewhere. Unlike me, she dances at many powwows and knows just about everybody in local Indian country.

I’ve known April for nearly ten years. Like most Native students, we’d heard about one another through the moccasin telegraph before we met at one of the Center for Native American Studies many events. In 2003 we were working together at the Diversity Student Services office on the campus of Northern Michigan University. April held the staff position of Assistant Director and I was a student employee. We were both English grad students who had applied for and won the same Future Faculty graduate fellowship. Though we had much in common, there was more than an arm’s length between us. We both maintained the distance, each of us aloof to the other for our own reasons.

I chose not to share my apprehensions about this gathering with April; I hadn’t shared them with anyone. Though I *was* changing, opening up more, it had been my way to hold much inside since I was young. It had also been my mother’s and my grandmother’s ways. Both of them had lived the Indian boarding school experience, Grandma at Carlisle and Mom at Haskell. Reticence ran in the family. It had taken me years to overcome and still felt like a work in progress. I’d had “squaw” yelled at me by

neighborhood kids when I was growing up, and I still struggled with a residual reserve that had been passed down in upbringing and reinforced by the cruelty of playmates. I considered the gathering to be an economical getaway to a picturesque location, but as we neared St. Ignace, a nagging anxiety about what this experience would involve that had been lingering in the back of my mind charged to the forefront. My tribal affiliation is Sioux to the general public, Lakota to me. My matrilineal ancestors descended from one of the great horse cultures of the American Plains. Like many tribes, they'd been pushed farther and farther west as European Americans forced surviving tribes people west and took the land. The Anishinaabe had been pushed into Sioux territory effectively making the groups combatants for dwindling land and resources. The women on the island were the descendants of my people's enemies.

The gathering was predominantly a circle of Anishinaabe women whose planners continued to live many of the traditional, old ways of their woodland ancestors. I'd only begun to learn my own tribal traditions as an adult and had never lived as a traditional Native American woman. I wasn't quite sure what to expect. The planners' agenda listed four ceremonies, but since April and I were arriving late we might only participate in one or two. What would happen? The agenda stated "Please don't forget a skirt!!" which referred to a dress code for ceremonies. Would I be out of place, even with my skirt? One of the planners, an Elder named Julie Snyder, had urged me to attend years earlier. This year I'd become friendly with Linda Conner, another organizer, in the Diversity Student Services (DSS) office. Linda, too, was welcoming and encouraged me to join the women. Still, my apprehension made me glad for the activity of unloading the baggage and

boarding the ferry, suddenly reprieved from caffeine chatter and the confinement of April's vehicle.

The water of the Straits of Mackinac worked its mesmerizing magic. My anxiety was slipping away. As the ferry accelerated smoothly away from the pier and the wind rippled my hair, concern evaporated. I savored the glide across the water's calm ballet. Casting the Weather Channel as a precise oracle, temperatures were mild, the day airy and brilliant. Crossing conditions were idyllic. This sort of day is profoundly reminisced for mental health purposes deep in the glacial grasp of an Upper Michigan winter. The sun bounced countless diamonds of light off tiny wavelets raised by brisk, shifting winds. At broad intervals the brilliant, azure sky sported flat-bottomed, popcorn cumulus clouds, a confirmation of fair weather. A thirty foot sailing sloop heeled over off the ferry's port bow, her mainsail filled to capacity, as she quietly sliced through easy wind and water. Eying movement beneath them, seagulls swayed overhead, eternally anticipating a handout while ducks bounced like stately corks on the water's busy, cobalt surface. Standing on the balls of my feet in a row of seats amidship, I grinned and leaned into the wind. The captain's mate glanced my way several times noting my upper torso extended beyond the starboard railing. I must have reminded him of a dog straining out of a car window. Though I was aware of his concern, it was lost on me; I never feel more attuned to the environment and more right in my own skin than when I am skimming across water. My only complaint about the crossing was its brevity.

Too soon, the Shepler's Line ferry passed in front of the massive Grand Hotel, perched among hill-climbing trees, entered Haldimand Bay, slowed to no-wake speed and docked at its island pier. April and I disembarked, located our luggage and secured a

horse drawn taxi in a whirl of activity that jarred me after the soothing boat trip. Thankfully, the Boy Scout barracks were well removed from the structured turmoil of the town's activity. As the taxi wound uphill away from the town, escaping the aroma of the island's famous fudge, the pungent, familiar odor of horse flesh and nearby cedar replaced it. Rounding up and out of trees, the barracks came into view.

The women's retreat was held in a long, wood, whitewashed two-story building bordered on either end by mature stands of pyramidal cedar that were producing thousands of tiny, aromatic pinecones at this time of year. Each cedar copse caressed a tall, carved and once vibrantly painted totem pole erected by Boy Scout troops that had used the facility over the years. Again, I vowed, in my meager spare time, to research the Boy Scouts of America's fascination with Native Americans. That, of course, had been at least part of the reason why the women had been using this facility free of charge since the gathering began. The front of the building with its long, grey porch looked out over a broad expanse of forest green lawn and across Huron Road to Fort Mackinac. The taxi pulled around to the rear of the building. Four large wooden picnic tables sat in a pea gravel courtyard near a whitewashed, half-screen door.

I suddenly realized this was it. I'd arrived and the strange lump I'd had in my throat about this adventure returned. Several women met us at the kitchen door as we entered.

"Aanii," they said, greeting us in Anishnaabemowin, their traditional language.

"Hau," I replied and the greeters looked into my face and smiled, comprehending my broad signal of differing tribal affiliation.

Two of them hugged April and smiled a welcome my way. I relaxed a little and passed through the kitchen into the dining and commons area. There on the first of eight long dining tables, an altar of medicine bundles, pipes, fabric, fur and objects from nature, many beautifully beaded, lined the polished wood surface. From this sacred collection, added to by the more traditional women of the group, would come the objects that would be used in ceremonies to be performed during the weekend. Some, like Linda, would stand at the table at intervals throughout the days to come and pray to the Creator.

April and I made our way upstairs to the long rows of bunk beds. We chose two near the staircase, rolled out our sleeping bags, unpacked, and began to settle in. Eventually, we joined the group on the first floor and drifted away from one another. I cruised from table to table watching the women bead a pouch project that they'd started before our arrival. At the end of June, Robelle Degenaer, Julie and Linda had provided a two-page informational and instructional agenda via email for participants. They listed workshop materials including seed beads, beading trays, beading needles, leather pieces, awl, sinew, glover's needles, thread wax, conchos, crow beads, and jewelry findings for earring and pouch making projects that would be ongoing over the weekend. Some of the women continually added beaded accessories to their own or their family's current powwow dance regalia. April had brought a guitar strap that she'd been working on for her band member husband Walt for some time. She was hoping to finish it this weekend. Among the group of many strangers, I recognized Valerie Fisette and her daughter Laura who were from Marquette too.

Val was just beginning work on a pouch. She'd cut it out of pearl grey, exceptionally soft split cowhide and was now carefully overcast stitching four identically

shaped pieces together with heavy bead cord and a glover's needle. I sat near her to watch her work.

"Hi, how are you?"

"Great. Did you bring some beading?" she asked.

"I brought a cutout pair of moccasins. One I'm almost done beading, but the other isn't even started."

"How long have you been working on them?"

"Oh, I guess it's been about three years ago now."

"Will you finish them here?" Val asked through a laugh.

"I doubt it. That would unbalance my in-progress beading projects bag. I don't think that's a good idea. I thought I'd add another partly done jewelry project instead. I was glad to see we'd be working on earrings. I'll probably finish one."

"I used to be tortoise-slow at finishing any of my projects, but then Laura decided that she wanted to dance. After that, I had powwow deadlines to meet. That speeded up my beading. But, I was slow before that. I remember one time…" Val launched into a story about an unfinished beading project that she'd finally completed years later. In the telling, she garnered the attention of women nearby and made most of them chuckle at her familiar antics. Not Native herself, Val had married an Anishinaabe man and had children whom she had chosen to connect with their Indian heritage. In the process, she'd been accepted in Native circles and had become an accomplished storyteller herself. I began to loosen up. Listening to stories, traditional or contemporary, unwound and relaxed me. It was my Buspar, my anxiety drug of choice. Val had just elicited an end-story hoot of laughter when I spotted Linda opening the oversized refrigerator door in the

next room. I glanced at the watch I'd promised myself I'd shed upon arrival and rose to slip into the kitchen. Lunchtime was nearing; I was hungry.

"Can I help you?"

Linda turned toward me and smiled the same calm, self-possessed smile that I'd liked the first time we'd met. "Nope. Not really. I'm doin' frybread. I worked the dough early this mornin' and after the pouch makin' started, I made patties and now I'm just about to fry them. The dunkin' and scoopin' is a one woman job."

"I was told that commodity dry milk adds a certain flavor to frybread that none of the store-bought kinds can duplicate. Whadda you think?" I asked.

Linda turned from the stove; the ladle she held was poised in midair. "My mom taught me to make frybread with commod milk. She told me my gramma's frybread won prizes, and no one could figure out why it was so good. The commod milk is our family's secret ingredient. How do you know about it?"

Perched on a rough pine stool, I willed my face not to grin and gazed into Linda's always striking, now startled features. I thought how very Indian Linda looked in this moment of amazement. "It's a traditional ingredient among certain Sioux families. It was passed down to us, probably like it was to you."

Linda shook her head, chuckling over the bubbling oil. "Well, you and I share a secret that's not really a secret, I guess. Didn't you say that you're Sioux? Where's your rez?"

"My mom's people own Rosebud Sioux rez land near White River, South Dakota. We recently met with an auntie out there who has inherited allotments from her relatives over the years but is wondering what will happen to the land when she passes."

"Yeah, that seems to be an issue in families these days. So many young people have left their reservations with no intentions of returning."

"I think about living on my reservation every once in awhile. Maybe, someday. By the way, is Molly coming?"

I'd met Linda's daughter Molly in a Native American Law and Government class that we'd taken together. I admired Molly's activism in many Native projects on campus and I still told people about her having introduced herself to our mutual classmates by telling them that she intended to be the first female tribal chair of the Hannahville Indian Community. I'd been impressed with Molly, happy to meet a young Indian woman who seemed driven, on track, goal-oriented.

"She should be here anytime now. She's applied to Haskell, you know," Linda said, referring to Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas.

"No kidding! I didn't know that. My mom went to Haskell back in the bad old days. It's really changed, if their website is any indication."

"It's changed a lot, but the damage done to Indian families in the old boarding schools is still being passed on. Molly's waiting to hear about acceptance for winter semester, and, in the meantime, she's goin' to a community college in Lansing this semester."

"I'm glad to hear she's coming." I was excited to see Molly, but Linda's comment about the injustices done by the boarding system made me think about my family. I had decided long ago not to have children. I never thought I was mother material. Parenting would not have been my strong suit. And, after years of study, I was now inclined to

believe that this lack of child rearing skills was in part due to that lack in both my mother and her mother who had spent years removed from family in boarding schools.

"Molly's been comin' to this gathering since she was small. I brought her with me to the first one twelve years ago. For a couple years, she went through a phase when she said she was tired of it, but the last couple years she's been comin' again. She knows how important it is. This year when she told me she was drivin' from Lansing, I asked her if she was sure that's what she wanted to do. She said, 'Absolutely, Mom.'"

Just then some of the women began to filter into the kitchen following noses attuned to frybread.

That afternoon the planners had built in on-your-own time before the evening meal. Some of the women headed into the woods and onto the many trails that webbed the island. Others hiked the opposite direction, down past the fort and the governor's summer residence, into town to shop and see more citified sites. I joined a small group of Keweenaw Bay Indian Community women for the walk to town. Just below the governor's mansion, an old cedar tree thrust its cone laden branches over the steep, paved road. Pinching off the end of a branch, I rolled several of the tiny tan cones between index finger and thumb. Arborvitae oil spread across my fingers and the pungent scent drifted around me. Even though cedar isn't traditionally used in smudge cleansings, its tangy clean aroma always reminds me of the soothing, purifying smoke bath. Stepping out from under the cedar canopy and glancing downhill, I pushed the four-inch branchlet

into my hair. My toes pressed forward into my sandals as I continued down the steep slope. Before long one of my companions noticed my hair ornament.

"Look at that. Cedar in your hair. That looks nice."

"Thanks," I said, smiling into the warm, dark face of a middle-aged woman just as the group turned the corner and stepped from a shaded side street into the sunlight flooding Main Street. The jangling tide of the town's shopping district engulfed us.

While I was glad to have found a few gifts for my family downtown, I hadn't realized how grateful I'd be to escape the jostling, consumer multitude until the taxi we'd hailed moved away from the town center. A couple blocks beyond downtown, we approached the entrance to The Grand Hotel. The imposing side view of the hotel, complete with guarded entrance, was peaceful, exclusive elegance looking down its nose at the serfdom below. I thought of the plans I'd heard that morning. A few brave women would sneak onto the hotel's expansive porch around midnight and occupy the sought after rocking chairs. It would be a contemporary night raid I thought. Someone might even count coup. One of the guards, probably the one who asked the intruders to leave, would be the target. I leaned back against the seat's headrest, closing my eyes to see it all.

The women would be occupying chairs in forbidden territory when a man working security would approach them and inquire if they were guests of the hotel. *No* would come the answer. *Then I'm afraid you'll have to leave the porch and the premises* would be his likely response. The women would rise to leave but as they made their

escape, one of them would step very near the male that held the bulky flashlight and pass an eagle feather along the curve of his chin. He would gasp, his authoritative voice silenced, not knowing what had pressed near his Adam's apple in darkness. He'd be thrown off balance by the touch of a traditional enemy that he'd never recognize.

Are you keeping track? I imagine myself inquiring of them after their return.

Their answer would be a holy number – probably seven. My grin broadened and I chuckled into the afternoon breeze passing over us in the taxi.

Another coup counted.

Now, clopping back toward the barracks after shopping, heat, exhaustion, and hunger overwhelmed me. Even the plastic covered Boy Scout barracks' mattress was looking pretty good. It had been a long day and tomorrow morning a Sunrise Ceremony was planned for 6:30 a.m. Those participating would rise, dress and walk to the other side of the island before daybreak. I looked forward to it and realized that my uneasiness had ebbed away. I fell asleep that night after a relaxing shower with a faint breeze roving through an open window over my sun-reddened face.

Just after 5:00 a.m., light sleeper that I am, I heard movement downstairs. I hoped it was a coffee angel brewing a pot and willed the aroma of my worst addiction to find my nose. I dressed, pulling on my patchwork skirt and grabbing my windbreaker and insulated mug just as the fragrance I longed for reached me. Downstairs, a tiny congregation stood

caressing their mugs and cups not far from the altar of the urn. I filled, sugared and creamed my coffee and went outside to sit at one of the picnic tables in predawn quiet.

The coffee did its work. After a partial cup, I came alive. More women joined the group outside and soon clusters of three and four skirted figures in deep shadow began drifting toward the trail to Arch Rock, the site of the Sunrise Ceremony.

Under the arching treetop canopy, the path has been paved for some years. The predawn murkiness supplied just enough light to safely see without a flashlight. I walked with Julie and Robelle. Julie has longtime back problems, so our pace was a mosey. She rubbed her backside with one hand and held the other out, empty.

"I wish I'd brought my walking stick with me," she said.

I veered off the path and before long found a serviceable substitute.

"How 'bout this?" I asked, handing Julie a wiggled branch about two-thirds her height.

"Well, I'll be. That'll do nicely. And quick, too. *Chi miigwetch*."

"*No hay problema*."

"Aren't we multicultural before dawn?" She dropped her back-rubbing hand, balancing into the new cane, as we all laughed.

The path banked left and began to drop steadily.

"So, have you been to Arch Rock before Grace?" Robelle asked.

"No, I haven't."

"Do you know its story?"

"I don't, but I'd like to."

"We believe that the Creator blew life into the newly created earth through the circle of Arch Rock. It is the sacred gateway through which the Creator passed on his way to Sugar Loaf, his bluff dwelling here on the island before the coming of white men. Now, there's a concrete and metal lookout, but the arch itself remains as it has always been. We're almost there."

The trail plunged into a sloped parking lot and I could see women beyond on the lot's opposite side holding their skirts up and climbing a short flight of stairs. We traversed the horse urine-stained parking lot and soon gained the lookout level. As if I'd boarded a boat, aiming for a position near the water, I headed for the end of the lookout platform. Julie's fingers grazed my arm. "Look to your left." There below, yet in shadow, was Arch Rock, impressive in its natural symmetry and size. The nearly circular opening in the rock looking out over hastening rows of waves in the shallows and beyond to the deep.

A breeze ascended up the cliff in front of me, stroked my face and swirled my hair around my neck. My skirt swelled away from my legs. The hair on my body shifted. I pulled myself up to my full height, sensing something old and distant, yet familiar. The open air seemed thick, dense, yet it was not. My hand fell on the cool, metal railing at the platform's endmost point and I looked down. Far below, the island's outermost road snaked along a narrow beach. Between the railing and the road below and behind and above me was verdant, sea green forest. When I turned landward and looked up, I saw two sagacious black crows had joined us to observe our proceedings. Silent, the pair stood by, the topmost branches on which they balanced barely stirring in the approaching dawn breeze. Then one lifted weightless into the cliff's updraft, suddenly suspended, a

curvilinear slash of sable. Angling, it balanced on currents unseen and drifted slowly toward the promising dawn.

Julie, April, and Linda stood near me; Robelle was nearer the stairs.

"We have four pipe carriers here," Robelle said, when everyone stood on the scenic overlook platform. "April, will you begin? Yours is the best voice."

In a strong, lilting tone, April sang an Anishinaabemowin worship chant.

When she finished, she lit her pipe and carefully passed it. Each of the twenty-eight women present drew on the pipe and handed it on. Then, in turn, Julie, Linda, and Robelle each sang and smoked and passed their pipe. As Robelle's pipe moved among the last couple women, the sun spilled fuchsia fire into the altering sky and the grey bed of water it rose from suffused golden. Silence reigned for charmed moments.

I felt rooted, unable, unwilling to tear my eyes away from the sunrise splendor before me. Everything felt imbued with newness, freshness. All felt true and correct. I knew I could do whatever I chose to do, whatever I needed to. And I knew I would. I had the ability and I was being gifted with the strength. It was here, all around me. These women were, are my strength. They are my community, intertribal, intense and loving. I would take their power back with me, take it home.

Gathering Again

Breathing deeply, we rise. We're back. It's been a year since we climbed the short staircase to stand in new daylight together on the metal lookout platform that juts east past Arch Rock. Of all the rituals that I shared during the 2004 annual Native American Women's Gathering on Mackinac Island, this observance we're about to relive – the Sunrise Ceremony – means the most. My memory of it is vivid. For having participated, I know these women, this place. It seems longer than just a year as I recall my first encounter with this holy place. Robelle Degenaer, one of the gathering's organizers, told me the story as we approached the vantage point.

The Anishinaabeg believe that the Creator breathed life into the newly formed earth through the circle of Arch Rock. It is the sacred gateway, a spiritual portal through which the Creator traveled on his way to Sugar Loaf, his bluff dwelling here on the island, before the coming of white men. Now, there's a concrete and metal lookout beside the arch's natural opening.

A deep smile blooms upwards, passes through my face and finds Valerie Fissette, who joins me against the heavy railing. She never keeps a straight face for long. Chatty and

joking, her commentary and humor are infectious. Because she's easygoing and handles it well, Val is often harmlessly teased. Many Indians consider themselves part of the community only after the group begins teasing them. This is significant in Val's situation since she is not Indian; it is through her Indian husband and children that she comes to us. Now her impish smile pushes back my negative thoughts and regrets. I'm grateful. This sacred, majestic place should conjure pleasant memories. And it does but I've made some unfortunate choices recently, decisions that I wish I could change. Often these days, my mind runs to the vigilance advocated by Spokane Indian author Gloria Bird, who advises that we ask ourselves regularly "What have I become?" These four words run through my head now, even as I shake myself and struggle to focus on place in the moment. Last year, we were early and stood for many minutes in the grayscale dawn anticipating the day's arrival.

A swelling breeze ascended the cliff in front of me, caressed my face, and swirled my long hair around my neck as I made my way along the artificial ledge. My patchwork skirt inflated away from my legs, ballooning upward in a Marilyn Monroe moment. I suppressed a giggle and then my body hair shifted, jerking my attention to more vital matters. I drew upwards to my full height and beyond, craning, alert, sensing something, an approach. The air caressing me felt thick, dense, inhabited. My hand met cool metal, the railing at the platform's endmost point and I peered down over the precipice. Far below, the island's outermost road wove along a narrow, beige beach. Specs in the distance, Canada geese drifted on waves near shore. All around the verdant, sea green

forest, predominantly cedar bounced and sprung in an onshore breeze. Turning, facing landward, I ran a glance along the treetops and discovered two astute black crows had joined us to observe the proceedings. Silent, the pair stood by; the topmost branches where they balanced heaved in fleeting current. Then one lifted, weightless into the cliff's updraft, suddenly suspended, a curvilinear slash of sable. Angling, he balanced on streams unseen and soared slowly toward the quickening dawn. Soon he was a pinpoint, rushing head on to greet the day. His compatriot remained, inclining her head, curious, patient.

I glance past Val up the escalating tree line. Finally, I'm here, in the moment. There she is. Perfectly still, the black crow sits in the uppermost branch of a jutting cedar staring down, inquisitive and clever. The island is in many ways an ideal habitat for her. The large conifers and oaks she prefers for nesting thrive here. Food scraps discarded by humans, seeds, carrion and dead fish from the Straits of Mackinac are plentiful. Known for her intelligence, she finds plenty of entertainment in the vicinity, not the least of which is gazing down on humans accustomed to transporting themselves in motorized vehicles as they wind, huge, clumsy, and loud around the island on bikes and horses. I lift my chin and tilt my head and the crow follows suit. We seize one another's attention, momentarily attuned.

"Greetings, Corvus," I whisper.

Val turns. "What? What'd you say?"

"Just welcoming the crow," I say quietly, pointing upwards in our Native way with pursed lips and extended chin. "She was here last year, too."

"How do ya know? The same crow? Really? It's a she? Are you sure?"

The tumble of questions makes me smile. Val studies my reaction, recognizes the tease and abides it good-naturedly. Arch Rock Sunrise Ceremony would feel incomplete without the crows. They are the watchers, the witnesses. Though wary of humans with good reason, curiosity drives their behavior. This one remains with us throughout.

Robelle is singing. She praised April Lindala's singing last year, asking her to begin the songs but April was unable to join us this year. Robelle's chanted words are Anishinaabemowin, the local Three Fires Confederacy language that is said to be the second most difficult language in the world for adults to learn. Though I am not a speaker of this ancient language, the song washes over me cleansing and transporting. I feel light as our watcher.

In a haunting, rhythmic voice, April sang an Anishinaabemowin traditional song setting bodies to sway. Freshening wind lifted the harmony skyward. Melody and implication ran toward the trees passing over the sentinel crow and beyond, prayers on the wind. When the last clear note circulated fully away, April lit her pipe and carefully passed it. Each of the twenty-eight women drew on the pipe or touched the pipe stem to each shoulder and then handed it on. Then, in turn, Julie Snyder, Linda Conner, and Robelle, the women who'd been bringing our group together year after year, each sang, smoked and passed her pipe. As the fourth and final pipe moved among the last couple of women, the sun

spilled magenta fire into the shifting sky and the grey bed of the great lake system in front of it snapped to burning gold. Diaphanous clouds veiled the horizon. Suddenly, silence. Even the constant breeze ebbed momentarily as light festooned oncoming day.

Robelle's voice is joined by those of Julie, Linda, and Nancy, Anishinaabemowin singers all. This year, the melody has just begun when the sun hurls itself impatiently up over the water onto the fluid horizon. Streaking light glances off pitching waves from skyline to shore creating a bustling path of light that points to our location. One long, thin cloud line runs ruler-straight to the north and south. Otherwise, the sky is clear, ready for the colors of a new autumn day. Singing continues until the sun's circle is fully visible, then the pipe carriers load and pass their calumets among us. When the ceremony greeting the day is complete, Robelle formally announces what most already know.

One present has asked for a naming ceremony. Her yearning will now be fulfilled. Robelle steps toward her from behind, places her hands on Fritzi's shoulders and says, "Today this woman will receive a name." Robelle begins to pray in Anishinaabemowin. Both women turn to pray in each of the four directions. Robelle's prayer rises on the wind, strong and confident; Fritzi's is quieter, nearly inaudible, spoken in English. A tear inches down her cheek. Two of her relatives are present, standing very near. Seeing her cry, they, too, quietly weep as Robelle continues, pointing out toward the water, sharing a pronouncement.

Then she turns toward us and says, "Fritzi is now *WaSwa Ganing Manitou*, Light Dancing on Water Spirit. She is renamed. She will introduce herself to each one of you with her name. Greet her."

Wiping her glistening cheeks, Fritzi steps up to each of the twenty-two women on the platform in turn. She repeats her name to each of us and we hug and congratulate her. I think about the naming ceremony that I've discussed with my younger sister Mary. We hope to contact relatives who will perform the ceremony for both of us the next time we travel west to our reservation.

Our tribal affiliation is Lakota. Our matrilineal ancestors descended from one of the buffalo reverencing cultures of the American Plains. Like many tribes, they were forced west into the lands of other indigenous peoples as European settlers took their ancestral homelands. My relatives were the lucky ones; they survived wave after wave of terrifying disease, swelling intertribal conflict, and brutal Indian wars with the United States Army. They managed to assimilate what was absolutely necessary to carry on through the wrenching rigidity of the reservation experience. My people on the Rosebud still hold allotment land through the Dawes Act of 1887, which shrunk our family landholdings, like most others. Many of my family still live there, believing that to leave the land where their ancestors are buried is unthinkable. My grandparents are buried in a small cemetery in the middle of sagebrush-scoured Mission, South Dakota. We go home every few years, as often as we can, to sit near the graves and speak to our Grands.

My stomach growls and I wonder about the breakfast that several of the women from the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community are preparing back at the barracks. The thermal cup I've been cradling is nearly empty. I need more coffee. The group begins to move off the platform and though I hesitate, glance back at the rising sun whose light is rehuing the water to nearly match the sky, the prospect of breakfast wins out. As I did last year, I return with the slower walkers, slipping into cozy forest shadow, listening and occasionally participating in their gentle conversation. Again, as I did last year, I spy a good walking stick, collect it and hand it to Julie who has had major back surgery and uses any available cane for balance. Julie thanks me and inquires about a recent project that she knows I worked on.

I sigh, "I'm really glad to be here. I need this weekend. The project itself was a success, but unexpected, stressful personality clashes developed. We were all disappointed. Relationships failed. I'd hoped for a new mentor and friend, but all that's left is friction, distrust, and antagonism. I feel unsteady. I'm here with all of you to rebalance myself."

"I'm sorry to hear that. That's too bad," says Julie.

"Yes, it frustrates me. I know I could have handled things better. But most of all, I'm sad. I just feel laid low by it."

"Well, it's a good thing you came then. This gathering is meant to recharge our spirits. You'll feel better by closing ceremony on Sunday."

"I'm counting on it."

A mound of nearly iridescent green in the crepuscular forest pulls me off the paved walk. I bend in half at the waist and stroke the spongy moss outcropping bulging from last year's leaf-covered floor. Fur, texture like rabbit fur, so downy. I have the sudden urge to lie down next to it, touch its inexplicable gentleness to my cheek. But, though I'm still quite flexible, getting up and down from a flat, prone position is not as easy as it used to be. Instead, I tramp back onto the path, rejoin the others.

Before long, we step out of the cool canopy of trees. Sunlight polishes the road and the yard behind the barracks. The clarity shocks and we squint after the dimness of the sheltering woods. Crunching over the graveled yard, we enter the kitchen, the screen door banging at our backs. The reminiscent aroma of bacon and coffee rolls over us. A feast waits.

"Look at this," I say. "French toast, bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs and juice. It all looks great."

"The French toast is made with oversized cinnamon sweet rolls that the KBIC women buy at the Hilltop Restaurant in L'Anse every year on their way here. They slice it, dip it in egg, and grill it," Julie says.

"Okay, now my mouth is really watering." The coffee I thought I hungered for most is temporarily forgotten. On my way to sit and eat in the main gathering room, I see an altar similar to the one that had been set up last year.

Nearest to the kitchen, on one of eight rough-hewn, rectangular dining tables that jut perpendicular from the room's long walls, laid an altar of carefully beaded medicine

bundles - pipes, fabric, fur and wood lined the coffee bean-colored wood surface. From the sacred collections, added to by the more traditional women of the group, had come the pipes, each made by or gifted to its owner, that were used in the Sunrise Ceremony. I noticed the remnants of a string-wrapped sage bundle laid in a reflective, blue-green iridescent shell. They'd smudged before we'd arrived. I was sorry to have missed it. Participating in the smoke bath, pulling the sweet smolder over my head and all around me always uplifted me while the scent reconnected me to a thread that ran through Indian peoples back beyond time before memory. Within that connection was the balance I now sought. I'd returned for this and other easings. Watching Linda, Robelle, and Julie stand at the table and pray to the Creator in their traditional way comforted, calmed me much like smudging does.

Out in the back yard, Georgie Maynard is working an L-shaped piece of catlinite. More commonly called pipestone by Indian peoples, the red rock has been quarried by them for centuries to carve devotional pipes and evocative effigy objects. It comes from a quarry in the Pipestone National Monument outside Pipestone, Minnesota, and Georgie has been working it for awhile. She sits on lawn that rings the pea gravel near the perimeter of the wood-fenced enclosure with a towel draping her lap. Alternately using a chisel and then a file, she reduces, forms, and smoothes the soft clay stone. Crimson dust layers the terrycloth. She snaps it skyward at intervals producing a red cloud that flitters in the breeze.

"Where did you get your catlinite?" I ask. She seems surprised. Perhaps it's my use of the Anglo-European name for the stone after the man who has become famous as the painter of Indians, George Catlin. He traveled to the quarries in Minnesota and then made their existence known in the East. And, in the way of Westerners, a stone that had long been used by indigenous people was named for a newcomer.

"From a friend who has a stash," she answers.

"Are you almost done?"

Georgie laughs. "This is the first time I've done this. I'm not quite sure how to be done. I'll learn that yet. I'm taking it slow and easy."

"Maybe we'll smoke it here next year."

"Maybe."

Nancy sits at the low Boy Scout-sized picnic table. She is reworking a small dreamcatcher for the fourth time, she tells me. This is a residual project from a craft session begun before the two students I traveled here with, Spring and Vanessa, and I arrived. Both young women are American Indian university students who traveled here with me in a State of Michigan Colleges and Universities vehicle. They are as thrilled to have gotten away for the weekend as I am.

"This just is not turning out like I wanted." Nancy is a meticulous worker, a grade school teacher who sets high standards for her own artistic fashionings. Her personal appearance is a broad clue; she always looks stylishly pulled together in a natural sort of way with strikingly beaded and silversmithed jewelry. Yet, she never appears overdone. Just as I'm about to say that the three-inch diameter, organic dreamcatcher looks good to

me, Nancy picks up a pair of scissors and deftly cuts the webbing away from the frame, dismantling her work.

"It wasn't meant to be. This is the fourth time I've restrung it and I haven't liked it yet. I'm going to bead for awhile."

I think about the bag of beading I brought with me. Though I accepted long ago that I am not and may never be a serious beader, I do admire those who are, and I buy and wear beaded jewelry. My bulging beading component kit makes me look more serious about the craft than I am. I hope again to someday work beads more often and I smile thinking of the single earring that I finished here last year.

An earring making session that I'd looked forward to began after the evening meal cleanup. Since the light was better in the kitchen, Peggie and I, a woman I knew as a fellow student and employee on Northern's campus, set out our work on the food prep counter and pulled up wooden stools. Peggie is an accomplished beader and I was grateful to have her nearby. I had no illusions. This would be a beading seminar with Peggie as instructor. Excited at the prospect of learning new technique, I laid out my materials. After the usual exclamations over one another's bead collections, we decided that we would both work with size eleven seed beads, one of the most popularly used sizes.. We picked a style we liked from Peggie's pattern book and discussed how interesting it would be to see the same model worked with completely different colored beads, some opaque and others translucent.

"Gee, I'm glad we're out here in the light," Peggie said, "I don't know how some of them can see size eleven beads in the dining room light."

"I don't want to struggle to see," I said. "I'm more comfortable here."

"Good. Me, too."

As we began to count beads according to the pattern's instructions, two young girls from Peggie's rez, the Keweenaw Bay group, approached us.

"Can we bead with you?" Shona asked, in her shy way.

Peggie turned, gently smiling from beneath dark, straight bangs carefully cut to fringe her high forehead.

"Sure. Bring your things here." Her answer was always the same.

They left and quickly returned, happy at her expected, sincere welcome. She drew the girls into our seminar making us a foursome. They pulled stools around, one on either side of her. Peggie shifted her instructions to include two more novice beaders. I smiled, watching the girls settle in. Beads shared, as always, needles threaded and knotted, the projects began. Peggie quickly ascertained the girls' skill levels without asking them any questions about how many projects they'd worked on in the past. I asked questions and so did the girls. Peggie instructed our group jointly and individually, carefully stringing bead by bead with each of us. We all worked, hunched over and chatting, for some time.

When my shoulders began to ache, I straightened, stood, and reached overhead and backwards, stretching. My eyes found the plastic kitchen clock and I was surprised to see two hours had elapsed while I finished one earring. Well, I thought, that's why I only finish half a project each time I begin. I realized I was tired and ready to head toward my bunk bed upstairs.

"When will you finish the other earring?" asked Peggie.

"Probably the next time you and I bead together."

I decided I would offer Peggie tobacco and ask her to get together after we returned to Marquette. The traditional form of request would assure at least one more beading session and I hoped more would follow. Peggie has the gentle patience and kind responsiveness of an exceptional teacher and I hoped to learn more from her.

Peggie hadn't returned to Northern this fall, so I'm anxious to spend time with her here, to just talk and listen as we bead. As it turns out, she beads efficiently and beautifully, as always, and I just sit beside her watching and catching up. She has moved to the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community reservation near Baraga, Michigan, and is sans email, so I'm feeling out of touch with her. I sidle sideways onto a long, wooden bench and sit next to her.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Wonderful," she says, her customary answer and part of the reason I admire her. She dependably lacks most of the complaining, whining behavior that so many of us fall into. She never curries sympathy. To waste immoderate time dwelling on the negative is simply not her way. Though not Pollyannaish, she is upbeat. Her life has not been easy, yet, in her, I see the balance that is seemingly always just beyond my reach.

"I don't miss university classes at all but I do miss my officemates in the Center for Native Studies," she continues in her own forthright way. I appreciate her plainspoken sincerity.

"There's a hole in our office for me now," I say.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. I'll be back someday."

"When?"

She smiles, but says nothing.

"You better."

I watch her bead a drapey, shoulder-duster earring, and I think about what her people, these Anishinaabeg, believed about beads long ago. Some still do. The beads are *Manidoominensag* in Anishinaabemowin*,* little spirit beings, and for Anishinaabeg and other indigenous peoples they are sentient. Their powerful flash, which in many cases replaced traditional porcupine quills for embellishment, is far beyond the inanimate. They have presence and existence in their own right. In the choice of color, pattern, and size, they disclose much about the maker and the wearer. They pull light toward themselves and reflect it back, capturing attention, manipulating gaze. They are both revelatory and diversionary. They enhance the living and adorn the deceased. Several Indian cultures bead the bottoms of moccasins worn by horse riders and by the dead.

"Did you finish your other earring?" Peggie asks.

"Hmmm… you mean the pair we worked on here last year? No. They're here, but I probably won't get to them." Just as I hadn't gotten to another beading session with her back in Marquette.

"You know I'd help you," she says.

"Yes, I know. I'm just not in the mood."

"Okay."

At this time last year I had such good intentions of making time for beading with Peg at home. It didn't happen and now she's moved away. An opportunity lost. I promise myself, once again, to embrace these occasions, not to let these chances for community slip away. They are precious. Yet, here I am not taking advantage of a current opportunity because I've been troubled, distracted, feeling like anything that I beaded now would reflect my peevish grouchiness, my negativity. "Get over yourself," I think, realizing again how lucky I am to be here with these women on this beautiful island.

Too quickly, it's Sunday and we are cleaning and looking forward to closing ceremony. Everyone pitches in with brooms, dust pans, mops, paper towels. Some of the younger ones have to be prodded, but verbally nudged they are and two hours later both the upstairs and the ground floor are clean and tidy. Robelle asks that we all gather in a circle.

We stand shoulder to shoulder in the main gathering room as soft rain envelopes the building. We smudge, sing, and pass the pipes one last time. Everyone is quieter than usual. It is during this assembly that we are at our utmost as engaged listeners. Each of the organizers thanks the group for choosing to join the gathering. They are thanked, in turn, for their hard work in bringing us all together again. In a traditional talking circle, each participant speaks about her reasons for coming and/or her experience over the last few days. Announcements are made about taxis coming to transport us to the ferries. Before we know it, we're on the expansive front porch and the taxis are sliding toward us through the rain.

Damp, but not cold, we board the ferries for the crossing to the mainland. The rain stops, a reprieve that allows us to sit on the upper deck in the open. The air is packed, heavy with water as we pull away and accelerate to cruising speed. Every direction reveals dozens of varying tones of grey from off white to pale black. Only one of the 552 foot Mackinac Bridge suspension towers is visible. The other is submerged in swirling grey. The black steel superstructure and cables advance horizontally into a streaming wall of ashy vapor. Clouds spill vertically, frothing and eddying to the surface of the straits. The watercourse is opaque, submarine gray. I pass through the watery air, imbibing it through every exposed pore. I learn what it means to be a porous vessel. I close my eyes and feel netlike. Water passes through, around, over, beyond. Yet, it fills me too.

The taint I'd felt, the sadness and lack of community in one unhappy association with another Indian woman washes away. Drenched in mist, wind and water refine me. I feel cleansed. My perspective alters. I am grateful. Appreciative. A previous crossing sweeps to mind. This one, pleasurable in its communion with water, is so different than the one last year that brought me to the island for the first time.

Always drawn to boats, I looked forward to and relished every second of the short run from St. Ignace to Mackinac Island. The Weather Channel forecast was faultless, temperatures were balmy, the day fresh and gleaming. I knew these few minutes would come to mind again and again. Deep in February's gloomy chill, I would conjure up and dwell on the comfort and ease of this flash in time. Beyond the railing, the sun danced diamond radiance off bounding wavelets raised by brisk, variable winds. At broad

intervals the inconceivably azure sky, made possible by the area's distance from commercial and industrial pollution, sported flat-bottomed, popcorn clouds. A thirty foot sailing sloop heeled over off the ferry's port bow, her mainsail filled to capacity, made me think of a friend's sailboat and days we'd spent tacking off the Lower Harbor Marina and Presque Isle in Marquette. Above the ferry, seagulls swayed pendulous, eying us below, while ducks undulated among the swells. Straining beyond the balls of my feet in between rows of seats amidship, I smiled and tilted windward. The captain's mate eyed me nervously. I must have reminded him of dogs he'd seen, tossing every muscle possible into the wind beyond car windows.

Once again this year, the drive home prompts reflection. I feel better than I have in months as I ask Vanessa what she thinks. She'd been so excited about last year's gathering.

"Was this year's gathering as good as last year's?"

"Oh yes," she says, not hesitating. "I'm gonna recommend to all my Indian girlfriends that they come along next year. I did that this year, too, but didn't get as many takers as I'd hoped. How 'bout you? Are ya glad ya came again?"

I pause only momentarily, not because I have anything negative to say. I'm suddenly peaceful. I've let go of worry and anxiety about recent unhappy encounters. Some relationships are just not meant to be. Differences in personal philosophies occasionally preclude continued interaction. We can't all get along, even if we're Native Americans. Other opportunities will emerge. With this realization comes a surge of

clarity and energy and an enhanced sense of resolve. I ask myself "What have I become?" My answer is: A work in progress; I am a woman growing, discovering, realizing, gaining – still. I must remember to keep asking.

I turn to Vanessa. "Absolutely, I wouldn't have missed it. The ceremonies open my eyes. I see things more clearly, as if my vision actually improves. You women are the perfect lens for me. You teach me about myself. I want to go on learning, gaining new perspective from all of you, as long as possible."

"Yes," Vanessa says, nodding. "That's a good way to look at it. We make each other better, don't we?"

"We do. That's part of who we are, part of our Native spirit," I say, as I watch trees rushing by beyond the roadbed and turn my thoughts to next year's gathering.

Turtle Island

It's colder and rougher than it's ever been crossing the Straits of Mackinac on a Shepler's ferry. The passage is always windy, but Friday, September 22, 2006, is a low, gray day. I mull over our arriving and think of The Center for Native American Studies motto, 'The Gift is in the Journey,' that impressed me the first time I heard it and has become a mental touchstone, familiar and reassuring. More and more, journeying takes precedence over any of my destinations. And gifts evoke gratitude. I am certainly grateful at the moment, for so many things – to be healthy, to be teaching, to still have my aging parents, to have my year-younger sister, Mary, and, at the moment, to be making this trip. *Déjà vu* surges through me and I smile, realizing these matters filled my mind during the crossing last year.

This is my third consecutive year traveling to Mackinac Island for the Native American Women's Gathering. Many of the thirty to fifty women who assemble each year will be there to greet us when we reach our destination, though arrivals and departures are ongoing. We join one another on an island dense with stories for the local Anishinaabeg. Its original, longer name in their language, *Michilimekinak*, translates to Great Turtle in English. In their creation story, all of North America grows from a tiny handful of dirt that is placed on a turtle's shell. We congregate on this turtle island each third week in September for ceremony, beading, craftwork, community relations, and to

reconnect with one another and our mother, the earth. I no longer consider not going, choosing instead not to miss these women's irreplaceable kinship.

Since I began coming, I've encouraged Mary to come with me, to join us. This year she arranged the time off work and we're going together. I've been looking forward to this for months. Having Mary along makes the opportunity even more appreciated. I carry the memories of each one of these gatherings with me like precious stones; this one I will value and treasure as I would a Sleeping Beauty turquoise necklace.

We left Mary's house on Kawbawgam Road in Harvey, Michigan, at five-thirty Thursday afternoon for the drive southeast to St. Ignace where we bought all the ingredients to take a turn making lunch for forty and then settled into the Super 8 for the night. I'm so glad Mary suggested we make chili. Though the ingredients are heavy to transport, the dish is quick, easy and generally appreciated by a group of northerners. Food is always a challenge for this gathering. We carry in all that we eat and cook onsite in the large, well equipped kitchen of our lodgings, the Boy Scout Barracks. We also must remove anything that's not consumed, leaving the building free of leftovers that might attract small munchers, so food choices are pondered and discussed even more than normal. Indian people do discuss food often, as is often the case with populations who have a history of starvation.

Friday morning we drive directly to Java Joe's Café, which is conveniently near Shepler's, for immediate coffee and the closet-size restaurant's enormous choice of exceptional breakfasts. The sky is hidden behind a low, multi-gray ceiling that bears

down on us as we leave the coffee shop to head for the ferry dock. The leaden canopy is mirrored in the windswept Straits of Mackinac we are about to cross. My breathing quickens and I am antsy during the half hour wait for the next ferry. I have always been drawn to water, having swum any depth since age six. The crossing, being out on the water, no matter the weather conditions, is always exhilarating, freeing. I attempt calm by reminiscing other crossings. Not a good plan; my foot taps and a watch-glancing thirty minutes crawl. Finally, as a few raindrops catapult down, we board the ferry *Felicity*.

Mary and I climb up, while the other ten passengers quickly duck below, not even considering braving the crossing on the wind-scoured, pale upper deck. We choose seats just forward of the narrow steps in case we are compelled to dash below in an escalating downpour. I unfurl my small umbrella and Mary rolls her eyes. Into the quickening wind I laugh, happy to be here with her, and on our way to join our friends. Cool, separate beads pelt my umbrella as the white ship edges away from its mooring toward Lake Huron at the far eastern end of the Straits of Mackinac.

The wind quickens, then slices while we gain speed and leave the protection of land and buildings. My flimsy umbrella will not withstand the pummeling; I close it conceding again my own capacity for silliness. Mary recognized it and chose to sit along the other, starboard rail. Her dark, short hair flits all over her head and she's hunched over staring into her lap.

She jots notes, journaling for a nature writing class that she's taking at Northern Michigan University in preparation for application to the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program. I'm nearing the middle of my second year in that curriculum and we are both laptop laden, anticipating the inspiration that the island stirs. The wind snatches

at me, empties my lungs, swirls my hair furiously around my uncovered head and I breathe deeply and focus on savoring my surroundings.

Buffeted by fierce bluster as the ferry settles into its cruising speed, I'm glad that I picked up a mid-weight, quilted, nylon jacket as an afterthought. Though it's not really cold, I shiver in a stabbing whirlwind that fingers up my sleeves and down my neckline as I gaze over the port railing at the pearly dance of marine breakers. Wake spray flashes in graceful arcs, the boat an arrow, its wake the feathers pointing to its island destination. Today the water is rough enough that our backwash easily blends with the tossing ashen roil. The sixteen-minute ride zips by too fast, as always. Any time spent on the water is astonishing, wondrous, weather notwithstanding. The Great Lakes are a siren temptation, icy and unforgiving, lovely. A few seagulls twist overhead but the churning watercourse is missing its drift of waterfowl, like the surface-feeding mallards, so common in fairer weather. An Arnold Line ferry passes us, accelerating for the mainland. Too quickly, we motor in front of The Grand Hotel, pass the lighthouse and angle around the jagged stone break wall into south-facing Haldimand Bay. As in other years, dozens of oval, black birds stand sentinel along the outermost section of the break wall.

"What kind of birds are those?" I ask Mary, who besides being a student has also been a US Fish and Wildlife biologist for over a decade.

"They're cormorants," she says.

Since we never really cruise close enough to see them very well, I have wondered this for years. I've heard the word, but know nothing about cormorants and make a mental note to read about them. These trips, my increasing writing, and a neighborhood pileated woodpecker have spurred my interest in birds; I'm paying more attention to them

than I ever have before. I recently bought a field identification guide – a volume unusual in my widening web of textual Indianness – and now wish I had it with me. Something else to add weight to luggage that already contains clothes, bedding, towel, washcloth, health and beauty aids, beading supplies and the inevitable reading matter, along with food and laptop. Too much, I think to myself every year and every year attempt to whittle down; instead, I manage only to drag along a different combination of too much. I glance forward past the glass wheelhouse and Felicity's bow as the captain drops her to no-wake speed and we slip toward the island pier.

A flurry of action breaks the crossing's spell and is a letdown by comparison. We come ashore and find our luggage in the shouting, clanging, footfall bustle of Shepler's dock and street-side embarkation point. People, horses, luggage, freight, drays, taxis, carriages and bicycles congest narrow Huron Street, Mackinac Island's main avenue. The island ban on gasoline powered vehicles (with the exception of snowmobiles in winter) and a careful eye to Victorian architecture preservation promote a vintage atmosphere that is regularly offset by the prominent use of cell phones, palm pilots and I-Pods. Along with the damp, sinuous perfume of rain, the oversweet aroma of the island's famous fudge and the sharp tang of equine urine and feces swirl down the main street. We find our luggage on a rolling cart nearly curbside, just ahead of us.

"How do we get a taxi?" Mary asks.

"I'll get us one." I turn to a female porter wearing a Shepler's insignia shirt and a communications headset. The fair-haired, middle-aged woman calls for a taxi and then turns and says, "Your people are down at the point."

"Really?" I say, wondering how she knows who my people are.

"Yes," she says. "They're having some kind of performance down there."

"I don't recall any plans for a get-together on the beach."

The point is actually Windermere Point located at the western end of the shopping district, close to downtown. It's often busy with tourists, not a place we've ever frequented. I'm wishing I would have read the emailed schedule of events recently. Perhaps something was added, yet this doesn't feel right. I am confused and uncertain now as to whether we'll arrive at the Scout Barracks to find it deserted. For the great majority of the thirteen years that the gathering has met, the women have stayed in the Scouts' quarters free of charge, removed from tourist clamor. More recently, the Mackinac Historic Parks Commission asked that each overnight participant pay ten dollars per night to cover the cost of electricity and dry wood for our four-day fire in the towering, local stone fireplace. Aware of how pricey any accommodations are on the island, we are happy to comply.

A fleeting ten minutes passes as we stand in the eye of a tornado of activity until the taxi arrives. We load our burdens and ourselves onto a red and beige painted, wooden horse-drawn cab and as we pull away, movement swirls and intensifies the steaming essence of straining horses. We clomp uphill past the sprawling bustle surrounding The Grand Hotel and continue on. The farther we retreat from downtown, the quieter our surroundings become. Thicker, water-laden air muffles remaining noise as we gain altitude, and soon we angle out of the trees around Fort Mackinac and the long, rectangular, white clapboard Scout Barracks comes into view beyond an expansive, glistening, emerald lawn fortified by a company of Canada geese. We pay the taxi driver

$5.25 each, unload our gear, and enter the back of the building through the kitchen screen door, finally.

Indian women's faces turn to us, light up in greeting. As we drag luggage and bags around the corner and head for the main room, I see Georgie Maynard heading toward us.

"Grace," she says in her quiet, smiling way, "and Mary," in a subtly different tone that no one but Mary and I would notice. Mary and Georgie had a disagreement and then a falling out months ago. Mary knows that Georgie will be here. It's part of the reason she's come. "Hi George," Mary says, and behind me I feel her smile.

Beyond Georgie is Robelle Daegener, one of the gathering's longtime organizers.

"Hi, Robelle," I say, smiling into her welcoming face.

"Hi," she says. "I'm so glad you came."

"Wouldn't miss it," I say. "Do you know my sister?"

"She looks familiar," Robelle says.

"Robelle, my sister, Mary Henson; Mary, Robelle Degenaer."

Our progress toward the bedrooms has slowed to a stop.

"Would you like to bunk in the far downstairs bedroom?" asks Robelle. "Fritzi and Kathy are on their way out. They have to leave early."

"That'd be great." I'm thankful to be away from the noise and beaming red exit signs of the single, vast bedroom overhead that easily accommodates fifty. A light sleeper, I've not packed the no weight/no bulk earplugs that I promised myself last year I'd bring. About to turn away, I recall the porter's curious announcement and question Robelle.

"I was told in town that 'our people' were down on the point. What did they mean?"

"There's a historical reenactment being staged on and off over the weekend. It involves Anglo American and Indian contact and events that were supposed to have happened during the nineteenth century," Robelle says, her brow furrowing and her posture stiffening. "I'll talk more about it later. Fritzi and Kathy are almost ready to go."

We wind our way into the northeast bedroom and settle our belongings into the longish room furnished with four bunk beds on metal frames, peg and rod wall-mounted hanging systems, a wooden shelf unit, and our own bathroom complete with a spacious cement and tile shower. *Pilamaya*! I say to myself, thanking the powers and reflect again how often timing is everything.

As I'd hoped, we've arrived in time to take part in one of the regular traditional activities. Julie Snyder instructs the group sitting in the main gathering room. We are to find a place in the surrounding woods, sit, and open our minds to what we might bring back with us from the environment that would indicate, at least in part, why we are here. This exercise can be a tangled pursuit or a stroll in the woods, depending on individual outlook. Julie explains that for her the earth has had a voice since she was a child; she has felt called to, spoken to by nature for most of her sixty years.

"I remember not wanting to tell anyone when I was a kid that the apples on a tree were calling to me," she says. "I was afraid anyone I told would think I was crazy. I ignored the stones and other objects that spoke to me, until I no longer could."

Not all of us are that in touch, myself included, but we are open and willing to take part. We fan out onto drying terrain, attempting to separate ourselves from one

another, like spokes in a wheel, but it's not simple. We've been asked to return in a half hour, so we can't venture too far. And part of the wheel isn't wooded, so we are confined to north and east directions. I step off the blacktopped road beyond the barracks yard and head east into the trees.

Though I concentrate on moving quietly, I am thunderous in the forest, snapping branches and crunching leaves, a townie transplant here. Around me the hardwood forest is primarily maple, birch and elm with a mix of hemlock, cedar and white pine. The leaves have just begun their autumn fire and the canopy above remains intact. Brightening gray sky domes above swaying, leaves that won't be green much longer. The trees are second growth; the first was cut long ago to feed the fires, build the homes, and support the logging industry of trappers and tradesmen on this crossroads of the French fur trade and British colonialism. I traverse up and down hillocks coming across other women seated, often leaning against trees. We don't speak, as we've been charged with silence. I move on, unsettled, feeling as though I'd rather cover territory, see as much as possible in the trees rather than sit. I try for silence in motion, never really accomplishing it. The quiet beyond my racket is deafening. Even though animal life is limited in this viridian, water-bound ecosystem, I wonder where the birds are. Then, two impossibly white, symmetrically round objects stand out just ahead. As I step toward them, I know they can only be one thing. Disappointed by their presence, I retrieve new golf balls from the beige-green turf. Farther along, I bend to pick up a branchlet profuse with tiny tan cedar pinecones and beyond a bright white, downy fluff of feather. When I'm certain I've been wandering for more than a half-hour, I reluctantly return, join the others. It's time to share why we've come back with our acquisitions. As instructed, we form small groups

of not more than six at the long wooden tables around the room. These are intimate talking circles in which each group member discusses why she chose to carry back the objects in front of her. When each person has spoken to her table mates and we've selected a group spokeswoman, we are ready to share our thoughts with everyone in the room.

Working together, our group reaches a harmonious adaptation of all our chosen elements to form a single, balanced whole. I am asked and agree to speak for the six women at our table. Small separate circles at different tables down the length of the room turn inside out, moving benches where necessary, to form the one larger circle that includes everyone. Julie asks who will begin and a speaker in another group relates the challenges and lessons that our mother shared with them through the objects she placed in their paths. I make a motion to speak second and stand. Julie nods my way.

"The objects we returned with spoke of the circle of life," I say. "Several of us brought new pinecones and thought about birth and the reawakening of the earth within its yearly cycle of renewal. Some of us also contemplated aging and death, a felled tree and its decomposition and return to the soil to support and enrich future growth. We considered the footprints we leave behind, sometimes not earth wholesome, like the golf balls one of us found. And all around us were those years of development in between when plants rise and mature in height and beauty. The circle supports itself as we find power in the strength of each link and the larger circle of life that it represents." I sit and smile into the nodding faces around me. Before long my gaze is drawn out the window across the room, over the lawn and into the distance.

Each group shares its thoughts, some similar to our own, some personal and intimate. We draw closer to one another and to our mother as if braided together by the blended experiences and privileged information that nature and talking circles generate.

Saturday, shortly after 11:00 a.m., Mary's voice penetrates my down-blanketed, bunk bed cocoon. I've been dozing, not really sleeping, but the building's been quiet. Since breakfast ended, Robelle has been sharing some of the traditional teaching that she's acquired over years spent at ceremonies and in the company of traditional spiritual leaders. She's been encouraged by her peers more and more often to impart her accumulated knowledge and, after some soul-searching, has taken up this vital role.

"You'd better get up, girl," Mary says. "It's almost time to start the chili."

"Okay," I say. "Is Robelle done?"

"No, but it's time."

"Alright," I say, knowing that Robelle will end her teaching soon. The women's questions will quiet and give way for now to their stomachs' interest in what's for lunch. I take an outdoor route around the meeting room and am happy to see the sun has come out; azure sky is pebbled with occasional clouds whose reflections race across diminishing puddles in the pea gravel yard. I reenter the kitchen through the whitewashed, wood framed screen door and begin choosing cookware and utensils we'll need from a wide assortment. Mary and Rachel, a helper, begin opening cans of beans and stewed tomatoes as I brown several three pound tubes of hamburger and pour off grease. Mary empties cans and seasoning packets into the deep pot I'm stirring, quickly

combining all the chili ingredients. Onion topping is cut, shredded cheese set out and crackers and breadsticks arranged on the prep island at the kitchen's center that we use as a buffet server. The Scout barracks is destined to be remodeled soon. The plan calls for a kitchen modernization that I hope will include a sizing up of the prep island. Women begin to filter into the room and ask what's for lunch.

"Chili," we answer in unison, which is met with "Mmms" of approval.

Mary is complimented with 'good idea' commentary when I say the suggestion was hers. I've never cooked much and would not have thought of chili, but it's working out well. I'm standing next to Val Fisette, Georgie's sister-in-law, garnishing a bowl of chili when she elbows me and inclines her head behind us. I glance over her shoulder and see Mary and Georgie hugging one another. "Oh, don't cry," Georgie says softly. Mary's eyes are spilling down her cheeks. I turn away, unable to watch my sister cry. "'Bout time," Val says and I nod in smiling agreement.

I find a seat in the gathering room and enjoy our chili enough to consider seconds. But, when I look into the cavernous pot still on the oversized, enamel kitchen stove, it is nearly scraped clean. As it turns out, we could have made more. The quadruple portion we planned was just not enough. Next year.

While the group is assembled and fairly quiet, Robelle stands and faces us.

"Several women have asked me about the reenactment taking place this weekend. It has become an annual tradition on Mackinac Island; it just hasn't been held on the same weekend we've been here in the past. I have spoken to members of the Historic Parks Commission and to one of the organizers about my concerns of how accurately Indian people are represented," she says.

"Why? What are your concerns," several women ask.

"In years gone by, Indians have robbed stores downtown as part of the reenactment. It has become a tradition and storeowners are now preparing baskets of goods that the Indians are expected to 'steal,'" she says.

"And the Parks Commission is a part of this?" someone asks.

"They were, but they've pulled away from it and are no longer associated with it," Robelle says. "I'm telling you all this so that if you go downtown and see people dressed in costumes, you won't be quite as shocked. The reenactors are everywhere in full costume, so the chances are very good that you will see them if you're in town. Also, the Parks Commission has been very good to us over the years, so we are in a bit of an uncomfortable position. I'm asking that you remember that we are lucky to use these accommodations every year for the small fee that we pay. The reenactment is upsetting but let's try to work through channels for change."

Women all over the room are frowning, unhappy, and commenting to one another about Robelle's announcement. Someone's fist loudly meets the tabletop behind me.

"We should walk down and check that out," Mary says, in between last bites beside me.

"I understand why you want to and I might want to too if it was happening somewhere else. I don't come here for that – for confrontation. I know I'd be upset and angry and I just don't want to go there," I answer.

"Okay," she says, "I understand."

Julie stands near the table where she's been sitting in the corner and turns to the room.

"We have a language session scheduled for this afternoon. This is how it will go. Think of a word or words in your language. When it's your turn, say the word or words loud and clear. We will all try to guess the meaning of your word," she says. She's deflecting attention away from thoughts of the reenactment, at least for now.

Mary and I are interested in this language lesson for several reasons, one of which is that we are unusual in this company. We are Lakota and our indigenous language belongs to the Siouan language family, while most of these women are Anishinaabe, their language being Algonquian.

We have lived among the local people for many years and heard their language, said to be extremely difficult to learn as a second language. We're not able to guess any of the Anishinaabemowin words shared. The word I choose to give is *pilamaya.* A woman across the room says correctly, "It means 'thank you'." Lakota has been the Indian language of Hollywood movies in the rare moments when filmmakers cared about any degree of authenticity. I recall my mom leaning forward, angling her ear toward the television and saying, "They're speaking a few words of Lakota," while we watched a Western now and then when we were growing up. Because of this, Indian people tend to know a few Lakota words even if it's not their tribal tongue. Our tribe is the stereotypical Indian, the poster people for what Indian is in the US.

We all know both the symbolic and practical importance of this language exercise. The indigenous languages of the Americas have been dying for some time as their elder speakers pass on and the young do not replace them as aboriginal language preservationists. Only very recently has there been a resurgence of language teaching with immersion programs on reservations. It's believed that these programs may save

languages and, by extension, save cultures. I try to learn a new word regularly in Lakota, as these women concern themselves with knowing and speaking Anishinaabemowin. We bear and share our cultures through our languages.

Sunday, well before 5:00 a.m., I am restless, my back aching from a combination of factors, not the least of which is the plastic coated, well-worn mattress that I've slept on the last two nights. I've been jarred awake by bursting wind, rain splashing in puddles, building creaks and groans, snoring, toilets flushing, and a crash in the near vicinity that I learned the next day was someone falling out of bed, along with several more knocks in the night. So here I sit, with my sister beside me, in the softly lit gathering room. We are both typing by the light of a gooseneck lamp. Opaque blackness and persistent dripping, tapping rain saturate the distance beyond the series of closely set 5 × 3 foot tall windows at arm's length. It's been drizzling most of the night. Unless it stops soon, we'll have a soggy departure similar to last year's. Mary and I sit on a long, coffee-colored bench, and occasionally read our newly constructed sentences to one another. Slowly, the women drowse from their ancient, spring-groaning beds and drift around us toward the kitchen with its welcoming coffee and tea. They discuss the calling of drays and loading of baggage for the mile-and-a-half trot to the ferry. It's the older of us waking first, often longtime participants. The young sleep on overhead and some of the discussion runs to their lack of help and participation in the preparation of meals and cleaning the aftermath – a perennial dialogue, an ongoing frustration.

Robelle walks into the room and I think of her hard work organizing this gathering. As she walks past a sign-in and contact information sheet that's been on the table for days, it occurs to me to thank her and to question her.

"*Chi miigwetch,* Robelle," I say in her language.

"For what?" she asks.

"For everything."

"Oh, you're welcome. I have help."

"I thank them too. Oh, and by the way, how many of us are here this year?"

"Thirty-nine," she says, sounding pleased with our number.

"I remember one year about three or so back we had seventy-nine women here. That was a busy year. I think that was the year we made moccasins," says Jane, another of the longtime participants, flexing from a craftwork hunch. She is quietly knitting beneath a high intensity desk lamp across the room.

I think about the cut and partially beaded pieces of leather at the bottom of my craft case that were supposed to be a pair of moccasins about five years ago. The case sits just beyond my laptop. I opened it a couple times in the last two days, gazed in at its contents, and closed it each time. Its increasing array of elements remain unassembled as I strike keys, crafting words instead. Some day. In the meantime, I tell whomever asks that I open the case to greet its contents every once in awhile just so they'll know they're not forgotten.

At 6:45 a.m. Robelle announces her intent to wake the remaining sleepers. She retrieves her eagle bone whistle and crosses the maroon linoleum of the ground floor, stands at the staircase base, and blows one shrill, insistent note up the steps. Action

begins in earnest overhead, though the ones who descend first are still older. One of our early-twenties Northern Michigan University students, Vanessa, joins us first from the younger contingent and slowly the young women and girls begin to filter past, wiping their eyes, asking questions, wondering about taxi arrival times.

The sky begins slowly to lighten to gray beyond the tall panes, but like yesterday, today's sunrise will be hidden. The Sunrise Ceremony yesterday was a subdued, murky event, very different from the others years before. Today again, everything drips and patters. Heavy wetness shrouds the sky beyond. Action heightens as our ending cleanup begins, so Mary and I shut down our laptops, pack our belongings, clean our area, and ready ourselves to leave.

Sunday morning is always busy for the taxi service; waiting up to two hours isn't unusual. When I tell Mary this, she says, "Well, I hope we're not here waiting for another two hours." She has a writing assignment due on Monday night and is anxious to get on the road for the three hour drive home.

The first taxi that pulls up on the front lawn has room for us. We load our gear and depart, pulling a hastily filled wagon of baggage behind us and waving to women standing on the porch who will take later rides or walk to the ferry. Our accommodating driver heads east, choosing a route into the downtown that I've not taken before. Several times a bag splats to the pavement from the open cart and our matched pair of horses is reined to a stop. Mary jumps down and retrieves each bag, bringing it up into the taxi with us. We pass houses built on the summit of the island nearly three hundred feet above the water as we descend toward the town. As our brown mares switchback us downhill, homes and yards snuggle closer together on angling ground close to the town proper. The

last fall flowers flash hue and tint in abbreviated yards, bent under the weight of moisture. The din heightens.

We pull up, pay, and unload, gathering our belongings onto a Shepler's cart destined for a St. Ignace ferry. We say goodbyes to a few who'll wait for others on their way down. Mary and I stride nearly the length of the long, wide pier and I realize as heavier rain angles down that this will be the first crossing that I'll be forced to make below deck.

It's spacious, clean and warm down here, the view much better than I'd imagined. The windows are tall and span the entire length of the several hundred seating capacity. I have to admit, it's cozy, dry and windless. If I weren't already having an all-time worst hair day, I'm sure I'd really appreciate it. The sky is brightening to the west as we buck and slam through white-capped water bound for the mainland.

Later, while Mary steers us west toward home, just before I doze off in the cozy warmth of the car, I notice that the foliage is much more colorful than it was just three days ago. This may be a particularly flashy autumn, my favorite season in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where some years look like a golden light show, the forest lit from within by weeks long explosions of auburn and crimson leaves. It seems we're pulling into Mary's driveway in no time and she tells me she'll follow me into Harvey after we decide that we'll eat dinner together at Wahlstom's Restaurant.

Driving to the restaurant, I recall having told Mary on the phone that I was really looking forward to making this trip with her. Our family has a difficult time expressing our love for one another. We are neither verbally or physically demonstrative of our affection. But Mary and I have been spending more time than ever this year together and

I'm glad for it. I believe she is too. Our parents are in their mid-eighties and as their only offspring, we regularly discuss their inability to accomplish more and more tasks. In the not-too-distant future, they will no longer be with us. It's hard for us to conceive of, but that joint imagining has drawn us closer. We'll have one another.

We order the meal we ate almost every Sunday when we were growing up – baked chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, stuffing and cranberry sauce. Will we be doing this same thing twenty or even thirty years from now? Longevity runs in the family. Our chances are pretty good.

Mekinak Women

Robelle Degenaer, one of the annual Mackinac Island Women's Gathering's organizers, has called an evening talking circle. My sister Mary followed April and me upstairs to plunk down on her bunk bed while we unpacked and made our beds. I'd chosen a set of beds near Mary's, tucked in my sheets and down comforter on the bottom bed, and arranged my belongings on the top bunk. A glance into the copse of cedars to the north just beyond the four-foot high, unadorned window set in the wood plank wall between our beds made me feel snug, as if I were tucked into a cabin in the woods. The narrow sill accommodated a few small travel items.

April and I had arrived at the Boy Scout barracks only minutes earlier and we were looking forward to the promised turkey dinner that was set out in covered aluminum bowls on the center island in the dated yet well-stocked kitchen. Sitting on a bunk not far from ours in the long, sprawling bedroom, April was pulling off her jeans.

"Are you putting your skirt on?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, moving slowly.

After a hectic day working at the Center for Native American Studies at Northern Michigan University, she'd driven the three hours from Marquette to St Ignace where we were told that we had missed the last ferry leaving for Mackinac Island. Of course, we had already unpacked all our clothes, bedding, food, books, my computer, and myriad

other stuff, lined it up, and then parked the State of Michigan van in the overnight parking area at the far edge of the gravel lot. We had to fetch the van, repack it, and drive across the Mackinac Bridge to the Mackinac City Shepler's Ferry dock where the last ferry of the day was leaving at 6:30 p.m. from the Lower Peninsula Michigan side. We'd been concerned about arriving in time to make the last ferry as the number of passages dwindles each day along with the diminishing, autumn tourist migration. I'd checked the time carefully but not the departure point. Now we were paying for my lack of attention to vital detail. This first faux pax should have alerted me. I should have recognized it as a sign, but instead I was actually looking for good physical signage to guide us to the unfamiliar ferry landing.

Luckily, at the end of the first off ramp beyond the bridge, a large, colorful sign directed us to the Shepler's pier and we made it with time to spare. We unloaded again and sat talking easily in the sixty-eight degree weather while watching a shades of brown female duck coast across the calm undulation of dramatically reduced water level.

"Look at the pier pilings," I said. "Their exposed, dark sections must be nearly two feet. They really make the lowered water levels obvious here."

"Yes, they sure do. We need rain." April said.

Residents along Lake Superior and all the inland seas in the Great Lakes system were concerned about the shocking drop in marine depth resulting from the driest summer in years. Many of us were hoping for a wet fall followed by heavy snowfall to replenish the lakes. Even those who were slow to believe in global warming were reluctantly becoming converts.

Before long the ferry *Captain Shepler* arrived, delivered its mainland-bound riders and cargo, and loaded us and all our gear. The sun sank nearer the horizon into building clouds as we chose a seat on the exposed upper deck. I smiled into the rising wind, perennially thrilled to be afloat, while the ferry pulled away.

Suddenly, two pristine golden retrievers strutted up the center aisle followed by their owner. The first, very blonde dog was noticeably the younger of the two. The elder dog, darker and curlier, stayed close to the very tall, swaggering man whose straight blonde hair mirrored the color of the dogs' coats. The buttery faced, barely full grown adolescent pup laid down on the pearly deck under white, molded plastic seats, serene and self-possessed as churning wind swirled its downy coat pinto like. Both dogs' appearance and demeanor gained them attention, particularly in combination with their look-alike owner. All three were seasoned boaters, welcomed into the captain's enclosed wheelhouse and placidly accustomed to boat rides.

Finally on the island after the windblown splendor of the Straits of Mackinac, we waited longer than we ever had for a horse drawn taxi and were hungry and road weary when we finally paid the $5.50 taxi fare and drooped, luggage-laden into the Boy Scouts barracks.

"I was asked to change out of my jeans and into my skirt," Mary said.

"Hmmm… no one ever says anything to me. They probably think there isn't much hope for that aging Lakota woman; maybe we won't say anything to her," I said.

"Well, you should change, girl," Mary said.

"Yeah, yeah, I will." I was hungry and crabby – mad at myself for having made a dumb mistake about the last ferry.

I pulled on the same earth-toned, patchwork skirt that I'd worn on the island the last three years. The skirt too had become a part of the ritual. Floor length skirts are ceremonial attire for Native women who believe that they create a column of openness to our Mother, keeping us closer, more in touch with her. As I changed, I thought again about this year's distinction, the fourth in a row for me. Indians revere the number four, watch for it, wait for it, believe in its innate power. I was hoping this fourth year would be the best yet.

Downstairs, April and I finally ate the Thanksgiving-style meal we'd been anticipating and joined the group for the talking circle. It was not at all what I'd expected.

"I almost didn't come this year," Robelle said. If she hadn't come, hadn't organized this gathering, none of us would be here. I was stunned, shaken.

"Last year was so difficult that I considered giving up our annual reservation for the barracks but I was asked not to by friends here that I talked with," she continued. "The barracks is very busy. If we give up this annual reservation, even for one year, we won't get it back. Some other group will take our place.

I was approached several times last year by women who were dissatisfied with the way things were going. The presence of children, a couple of late comers who were reluctant to pay the fee and several other situations just left me with the feeling that the gathering had moved in a direction that made me uncomfortable. After talking to Julie and others, I decided to try it one more year. If this year is like last, I think we should let someone else have our weekend. We'll talk about it before we leave on Sunday."

A glance around informed me that others were just as shocked.

I hadn't any idea that the barracks was in such demand but it made sense. Accommodations are very expensive on the island. Many of us who come for this gathering either couldn't or wouldn't pay the going hotel rate. This must be the case for others who stay here in the barracks on other weekends. I also had no idea that Robelle had had such an unhappy time last year. When I asked April about it she said, "Yes, I knew." Of course, she would. She and Robelle are very close, like age-spread sisters who cherish the luck of having one another for different reasons. I recalled one unhappy incident from last year – a misunderstanding in which an elder thought one of the young women was pregnant when she wasn't – and I multiplied that by what I imagined Robelle might have experienced and began to understand her disillusionment. Still, I hoped we could make this year better, turn things around.

I'd left my beading supplies at home this year. Another mistake. I had imagined that I'd spend my free time reading and writing. But, of course, I had the urge to bead since I had nothing to work with. As is always the case, these women were lovingly generous. Fritzi and Kathy, sisters in attendance like Mary and me, sat across from one another at a long rectangular table in the main gathering room and talked about what they'd bead. Fritzi said, "I think I'll make a pouch necklace like the one Nancy's wearing." I moved across the room to look at Nancy's piece. I've been fond of pouch necklaces for some time and liked the simple beauty of this particular design. Returning to sit again near Fritzi, I said, "I really like Nancy's necklace; I'd like to make one too."

"Let's do it together," she said.

"I didn't bring any supplies. I was planning to write this year."

"You can use my things. I have plenty, lots of leather and beads, needles and thread – no problem."

"Are you sure? I'd hate to use up your things."

"No, really. It's okay. I'd like to make the project with you."

We cut the tawny, supple leather, chose the beads that we'd use, and began edge beading the simple tongue into a double fold-over pouch. Fritzi sat across the rough-hewn table from me. Our work area was brightly lit by a high-intensity lamp that Mary brought. Eventually Peggie, a friend from NMU that I'd grown closer to at this gathering in the past, and April came to sit next to one another at the end of our table. We all beaded, working on different projects together. I thought about Native women doing this for millennia and the significance of this behavior among them. It felt companionable, intimate, sisterly. We felt like the web we are, interwoven and familiar. I began to believe that these gatherings would go on for a very long time. How could we possibly choose not to carry on this experience? We need it, we need the time away from our daily lives, and we need one another's company, generosity and strength. We also need to be here, on this island that has meant so much to Native peoples for so long. Many gatherings have taken place here since time immemorial and the spirits of generations of ancestors dwell at this juncture.

All seemed to go well. I wasn't aware of any unrest, of tension or bad feelings among us. On Saturday we performed a Sunrise Ceremony at Arch Rock, as is our custom. It was overcast, but looked as though there'd be hope for a clearing sky. We trekked through the lightening woods and up onto the platform that runs beside one of the landmarks that continues to draw us each year. I'd remembered to bring my camera this year, another reason to hope for sunny conditions. We sang, spoke, and passed the pipes, and, just as we'd hoped, the clouds began to run away, the sky emptied, and suddenly the sun glittered through barely risen, casting a golden blush over us all. Our jackets, vests, sweatshirts, and skirts were suddenly aglow, washed in brightness and we shaded our eyes, gazing toward the fiery radiance in gratitude. I appreciated my Transitions lenses. My eyeglasses darkened swiftly, shielding my eyes from the dazzling illumination doubly bright in reflection off the wide expanse of water below us. Taking advantage of the shift in lighting, I snapped more than a dozen photos after our sing. One Arch Rock shot is striking, with the stone arc foregrounded in shadow and the circle of background beyond bathed in sunlight.

My sister had gotten her wish. She'd said she hoped that we'd have a clear sky Sunrise Ceremony. Gloomy, grey clouds obliterated the rising sun last year when we were here, her first year joining us. When the sun blazed over us this year, our smiles expanded, along with our chatter.

We walked back through the hushed canopy of trees talking about and looking forward to the breakfast that we knew awaited us. Each Saturday morning we're here, the Keweenaw Bay women cook a memorable breakfast that includes French toast made with

the Hilltop Restaurant's cinnamon bread. This year, as always, it lived up to its reputation as our yummiest meal.

Robelle and Julie, another organizer, involved us in projects, talking circles, and activities throughout Friday and Saturday. During one of them, we headed out in all directions to gather refuse and garbage that'd been dumped all around us on the land. We disposed of most of it in large, wood-enclosed recycling and trash containers at the edge of the barracks' backyard. But we each chose one article to comment on in a talking circle. Why was this piece cast off where I found it? Why might it not have been properly disposed of? Why did I choose it? We addressed these questions and more in a circle that often focused on our frustration with littering and thoughtless contamination of the environment. We were particularly aware of the damage done to this miniature island ecosystem that is so precious to the Anishinaabeg and now to all of us who gather on this turtle island each year. The word Mackinac is an Anglicized variation of the Anishinaabemowin word *mekinak* which translates as turtle. The robust turtle is revered by many Native people for, among other things, the fact that for a short time after it dies its heart continues to beat. Like the stalwart turtle, we are determined in our commitment to protect and care for our Mother. For the remainder of our time on the island, some of us continued to retrieve discarded waste. Often my hands and arms were too full to lift anymore; I was forced to leave rubbish behind.

The days rushed by and the morning of our departure arrived in a flash. I opened my eyes in the blackness of Sunday morning and turned to look at the bottom bunk bed on nearest mine. Mary had already vacated her nighttime cocoon. I wasn't surprised. We're both early risers and coffee lovers. She'd been reading in every free moment and she'd probably felt the need for caffeine that very early morning. I rolled out pushing my toes into cold, waiting tennis shoes and groped in the faint light of a red exit sign shining from across the room for the sweatshirt I knew was near. Anxious to inch my backside up to the fire in the massive fireplace below with a full coffee cup in hand, I stepped carefully across the groaning floor toward the wooden staircase.

Mary and Robelle were the only women in the main gathering room below. I booted up my laptop thinking I'd take advantage of this lull in the action to interview Robelle. I was curious about the early development of the gathering.

"Robelle, would you mind answering some questions about the roots of our gathering?" I asked.

"No, not at all," she said, seating herself near me. Her long, thick grey hair was pulled back and caught in a graceful sweep by a large, beaded barrette. Pale, cozy pajamas covered her lean figure.

"What year did it begin? How did the Boy Scout barracks become the location?" I asked.

"We started in 1985 or 1986 with the Traditional Values Youth Conference. Kids from all over the state were invited by snail mail. We continued for eight or nine years

with a children's conference. Then the director Robin Menafee got married and he and his wife were expecting a child in 1994. They were unable to run the conference that year. The Menafees didn't want me to run the youth camp without them, so I asked some of our Native women if they'd be interested in keeping the reserved date at the Boy Scout Barracks to use for a women's gathering. They said yes immediately with very little discussion. The Boy Scout troops who have used these barracks over the years have always had to pay. Our group wasn't asked to pay for a long time. For ten years we used the barracks free of charge. Finally in 2005, with all the state budget cuts, the Mackinac Historic State Parks folks asked us to pay $10.00 each per night to cover the cost of electricity and the wood we burn throughout our stay."

"Were there problems with that?" I asked.

"Oh sure, there were. The person who complained loudest and finally announced that she would not return if she had to pay was not a Native woman," Robelle said, a slight smile playing across her face.

"What about the activities? When did they begin and how? Whose idea were they?"

"I did a schedule of events from the first year. I've always tried to incorporate doing something for the island since Mackinac Historic State Parks had asked and we agreed that we would do a presentation whenever they asked us to. But they've never asked us. "

"Another thing that happened along the way was talk for awhile of placing plaques at special locations across the island. Some of the sites discussed were Arch Rock, Sugar Loaf, Devil's Kitchen, & Sunset Rock, some call it Lover's Leap. The

plaques were Phil Porter's vision. He asked me to help write the text that would appear on the plaques from a Native perspective but then state budget cuts became so severe that the project was dropped because of lack of money."

I'd opened my mouth to ask another question, when Robelle heard movement behind her. Other women were stirring, rising, moving about.

"I'd better get dressed and get a move on," she said, smiling at me.

"*Chi miigwetch* for your time," I said, expressing my gratitude in her language.

"You're very welcome," she answered, rising with fluid grace and moving away.

I grabbed my chilled coffee cup and headed for the kitchen to microwave my nearly full cup that had gone cold while I'd typed. On my way back, I stopped to linger in front of the low fire. We wouldn't feed it this morning like we usually did since we'd all be leaving the island in the next few hours. Yet, it would still burn well into the fourth day of our stay here on the island.

Later I was upstairs packing and carrying belongings downstairs to be packed on the large dray for transport to the Shepler's dock when Fritzi said in an announcement voice,

"I can't find my camera. It's missing. If anyone sees a camera in a black case, will you please check it to make sure you know whose it is?"

I was passing near her when she made this declaration and I looked into her troubled face.

"We'll find it," I said.

"I hope so. The memory card has family pictures on it that I took before I came."

After a second announcement about the missing camera during our final talking circle in the grove of cedar trees adjacent to the barracks, we were cleaning and tidying up when Peggie lifted a black rectangle out of her luggage.

"This isn't mine. How did it get in here?" she said

"Is that Fritzi's camera?" someone asked.

"I don't know," Peggie said.

Fritzi was called and verified that it was hers. Peggie repeated several times that she didn't know how it'd ended up in her bag.

We continued to sweep and divvy up leftover food, packing and repacking as we accumulated or gave things away. I happened to spot Peggie sitting alone with her back to the building on the farthest picnic table in the backyard. I put off my project to join her. As I stepped near her, I became aware that her shoulders were heaving and I said quietly, "Peg, what's the matter?" She was sobbing almost noiselessly.

"I didn't take Kathy's camera," she gulped.

"I believe everyone who knows you, knows that," I said.

"All of that, that whole incident dropped me back into my childhood when my mother used to accuse me of stealing her things. I felt like a little girl again, being accused of doing things I hadn't done and protesting accusations."

"Maybe you should consider talking to Fritzi. What do you think?" I asked.

"Yeah, I should."

"It'd be best to clear the air with her, don't ya think?"

"I know."

"C'mon, let's go in."

"Okay."

A few minutes later I headed for the bathroom and then turned on my heel and retreated when I saw Peggie and Fritzi standing near the sinks talking. They'd work it out; I was confident.

I'd left my camera on the window sill in the gathering room and went to fetch it. It wasn't there.

"Has anyone seen *my* camera?" I asked, thinking I should have retrieved it sooner. "It was here on the sill."

"Georgie has it," April said. When I turned to frown quizzically in April's direction, she gave me a loaded look that I remembered later.

Georgie Maynard, a longtime participant in the gathering, heard our exchange and said, "Here's your camera, Grace."

"Thanks, George."

The following Monday morning, back at work in the Center for Native American Studies, I related the story of having found Peggie crying to April. She sighed and said, "I decided not to tell Robelle or Julie this, but I had $100.00 stolen out of my purse upstairs."

"Oh no," I said, forcing myself not to add 'Are you sure?' Obviously, she must be sure. "I packed my wallet deep in my luggage after that. But it was too late by then."

"Oh no," I repeated, still unwilling to believe it. "That's awful. How can that be? Who would have done that? Stolen from another woman during a spiritual retreat! I can't

believe it!" I rambled on, dismayed. "You don't think that maybe Robelle should know?" I asked.

"She was thinking about ending the gathering. I think she might do it if I tell her."

"Yeah, you may be right. That'd be awful," I said.

She'd probably be more shocked and hurt than I am. And it could be the end of the gathering for everyone. But our open confidence in the honesty of everyone in attendance was shattered. I'd never thought of hiding money and valuables in the company of these women. I'd left everything open and accessible in utter, unquestioning trust. Now that was gone. The distrust that flooded into its place felt cold, unfamiliar and unwanted. What I wanted was resolution but, in the end, there was none. I discussed this distressing turn of events several times with Mary, glad for the opportunity to vent but without any truly positive outcome.

Even though Robelle decided, after asking for everyone's input, to keep the weekend in reserve and continue the gathering, the fourth Women's Gathering ended in a sad, angry cloud of uncertainty and suspicion for me. Months have passed now and the wariness and aggravation have waned but disenchantment and frustration are still with me. Thinking about how one person whom we all trusted chose to treat us during a weekend of ceremony and goodwill depresses me. I've not made my peace with it. Not yet. I don't know if I will. The best I can hope for is that the thief will not return. Whether I will remains to be seen. In the meantime, I've decided to try concentrating on the positive memories and outcomes of that weekend. I try not to allow the shadow of frustration caused by one person's selfish act to completely eclipse the comfort of beading, talking, singing, smoking, eating, and just being in the company of strong

Native women. I continue to struggle to overcome my negativity; I endeavor to resist my own pessimism. I strain for balance, elusive equilibrium, subtle stability, easy to lose and difficult to regain. The steadiness I seek feels remote, though not unattainable. Why am I so miserly with my forgiveness? Why so merciless? What have I become? Perhaps all I need is more time. Maybe distance. Certainly wisdom.

Part Three

Family & Work

When I write about myself, I transform myself just as I do the past.

Mary Clearman Blew

Traveling Home

We've been talking lately about traveling to the rez next summer. I am stirred by the idea on several levels. My sister, Mary, and I are both writing now and we feel that this trip, like so many others, will provide endless fodder for our burgeoning prose efforts. Our mom's only brother, Clyde Giroux, whom she calls either Bud or 'my bro,' wants us to meet him there in August for one of the area's largest powwows and the annual Crow Fair. Both mom and Uncle Bud are in their mid-eighties. Will this be the last time that we're all together? Though South Dakota resembles a blast furnace in late summer to those of us acclimated to Upper Peninsula of Michigan weather, Mary and I think we should go. We want to. Our feet are beginning to itch. We're making plans. We tell ourselves that we'll go for the sake of the folks.

For years I've told people that my parents were gypsies. Not in the cultural heritage sense, but first, in the let's-be-movin'-on-down-the-road sense; and then, the let's-take-a-day-or-a-weekend-or-a-week-to-go-visit-relatives sense. Our family moved from town to town often when Mary and I were young. I was born in Chicago and fifteen months later my mom delivered Mary while we were living in Detroit. When I was three-years old, we were both baptized into my dad's religion, Catholicism, in Chillicothe, Ohio. Before I

entered first grade, we also lived in Riverdale, North Dakota, and three towns in California: Winters, Sacramento, and Bakersfield. I attended kindergarten in each of those California locations before my mom finally convinced my dad that we needed to find a permanent address so Mary and I could settle into a school system. While still in California, Wilma and Bill, my parents, discussed the possibility of moving either to Alaska or to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to set up a long-term household.

Dad's family were French farm people who had emigrated from Canada to live in a small hamlet called Schaffer, thirteen miles due west of Escanaba, Michigan, in a generation long past. Some of the Chailliers still live in that rural area, though none are now subsistence farmers. From there we've spread into the towns of Escanaba, Iron Mountain and Marquette in Michigan and to small enclaves across the country, though it's been the women who now live in locations like California and Arkansas, or formerly Minneapolis and New Orleans, so the family name does not appear on municipal records in these areas due to marriage name changes.

The autumn after my triadic kindergarten experience Mary and I began surviving twelve years of Catholic school in the Queen City of the North – Marquette, Michigan. Mary attended kindergarten at Fisher School and would follow me into the often strange academic world provided by the teaching order of nuns called the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

Shortly after I'd moved back to Michigan after a seventeen-year reincarnation in Illinois, Dad received a letter that had been mailed from France and was written in the regional

dialect of Lorraine. Since he could not decipher its contents, he called Dr. Kennedy in the French language department on the campus of Northern Michigan University. The letter was delivered to her, translated and returned to Dad. The writer was a Jean Pierre Chaillier living near Goubiving, France, who was doing genealogical research. He'd performed an international search using our last name, which he informed us means 'breaker of stones' or stonecutter, as part of a query string. Then he'd simply chosen one name, my dad's, and written a letter. Part of the letter's content shared the names of everyone across the US who carried our surname. He'd accessed records of my having lived in Palatine, Illinois, some years back and asked if Dad was related to me. It seems everyone with our name is rather closely linked in ancestry. There simply aren't many of us with the last name Chaillier. Dad answered the questions as best he could, asked some of his own and visited Dr. Kennedy again, who translated once more. He then mailed his response to France. He received another letter from Jean Pierre, but feeling that the translation process was cumbersome, did not answer it. I was disappointed since I'd begun to entertain fantasies of traveling to France to visit relatives. Recently, I've acquired this correspondence along with a photo of Jean Pierre and his wife. It is my intention to resume this correspondence some day.

After my parents decided that we'd travel to the Upper Peninsula to assess the job market and visit relatives, most of whom had never seen Mary and me, we drove cross country from California to Escanaba for a small family reunion. When the Michigan Chailliers

heard we were coming, they began to make plans for picnics and family doings. My dad is the youngest of seven siblings, five girls and two boys who survived. His only brother, my late Uncle George, still owned and operated a farm near Escanaba at the time. Its garage patio, adjacent apple orchards and sprawling lawn between the house and the road became our hub in mild weather. In winter, we filled the kitchen and living room with the imposing argumentation of seasoned card players. And we were loud. Cribbage was the adults' game of choice and no matter who was winning, there was always at least one loudly complaining loser.

"Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six, and a pair is eight," Dad counted. The crisp cards snapped the table's surface as he pegged around the board heading for home.

"Damn. Every time you've dealt, your point count's highest," Aunt Eunice griped.

"The cards are with me today," Dad said.

"Damn lucky." Louder this time.

I glanced at Mom across the room. Her face appeared impassive, but I could read her mind.

My mother had been raised in a traditionally quiet Lakota family, though that would change for a number of them in the mid-twentieth century. She commented repeatedly as Mary and I grew up on the earsplitting antics of the Chailliers at our gatherings. At a young and unscathed age, I was exceedingly aware of the decibel level and timbre of my public-speaking voice as I watched mom blink and strain not to throw her hands over her ears during family get-togethers. My Aunt Eunice, one of my dad's

four older sisters, was particularly strident and the example we were encouraged not to emulate.

Mary and I heard variations on the following comments from Mom numerous times beyond my dad's earshot. "Your Aunt Eunice is too loud. We can hear her all over the house. You girls remember that you don't have to shout to be heard. Often a softer tone of voice sounds important. Before you speak, think about what you're going to say and how people will hear it."

Mom had mixed feelings about Eunice. On one hand, she considered her to be jarringly opinionated, pushy, and without competition among my dad's sisters for female dominance in the family. Nor did either of Uncle George's wives, Vina, his first, who was the mother of his five children and had died slowly and painfully at home of cancer or Rose, his second, who was just happy to cook and clean and be a part of our raucous brood, offer Eunice any rivalry as alpha female. My mom never seemed to mind being an outsider; she knew who she was and didn't require validation from the Chailliers. And, as it turned out, my parents had a common bond with Eunice and her husband, my Uncle Jimmy. Eunice had married outside her race. Jimmy was a black man.

During one of our usual first night stopovers in the Twin Cities on the way to our reservation in South Dakota, Uncle Jimmy took us on an after-hours, private tour of the restaurant he owned in downtown Minneapolis. Mary and I were nine and ten years old respectively. We thought of it as an adventure. We'd never been in a business that wasn't

open to the public. It felt special to be there, just us, our family and we wandered everywhere. We sat in all the thickly padded, beige vinyl booths in the long, narrow dining room, walked behind the menu clad counter into the kitchen and pantry where the cooks worked and finally, even into the cavernous walk-in refrigerator where we shivered in our gaudy cotton, summer shorts paired with sleeveless tops. Exploration exhausted, we joined the adults who were sitting at a table discussing subjects that didn't interest us.

"Do you want a Coke?" Uncle Jimmy asked us.

"Yes, please!" was our only possible response to that rare question.

"C'mere, over here, to the pop machine. Now, you girls can help me out. I need to rearrange the order of the pop bottles in this here machine. So, if you take all the bottles out of the pop machine and line them up on the table here, that would be a big help. I'll put all the ones back that you don't drink later. Here, you'll need these." His extended hand held a full roll of new dimes.

The whole idea took our breath away. We jittered around bouncing off one another in front of the low, heavy metal rectangular body of the vending machine, positioning ourselves to begin the assignment.

"I'm first," I announced, finding it unnecessary to remind Mary who was the elder of the two of us. I fed dime after dime into the coin slot until she could wait no longer.

"It's my turn now."

I stepped aside reluctantly, but she'd allowed me to remove over half the bottles without complaint. We pulled each glass bottle of soda along its row that ran parallel to the others, through the ice cold water where it hung suspended by its tin bottle cap to the

rocking lever mechanism that, when fed a dime, would release the dripping bottle into our efficient hands. Though those hands were shriveled and aching after long submersion in the freezing water, we did not consider quitting until the work was done. Besides, some would consider us cold water creatures. We swam in Lake Superior at every opportunity, plunging sometimes daily for weeks on end into the numbing clarity of the unforgiving big lake. Nor did we choose which bottle we'd open on the machine's front and drink, until every bottle was sitting on the nearest table. Our task was clear and Uncle Jimmy's unexpected trust that we were capable of accomplishing it would not be misplaced.

Like his sister, my dad had married interracially. Mom is Native American. They'd met in Chicago. Both had been moving around and working separately in several heartland cities after the end of World War II. In the black and white photographs my mom has kept of herself from that era, she looks more Indian to me then than she does now. She was tall and willowy and wore either drapey, crepe dresses or Katherine Hepburn pants flowing around her frame. No matter what the background, I somehow always imagine a sealike sweep of grassy prairie behind her. I see her in my mind's eye standing on the Great Plains.

Wilma Verna Giroux was born a Sicangu Lakota and lived her earliest years on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in south central South Dakota. Her first three years of school she and her father, my Grandpa Vern, rode their horses from home to the White River. Grandpa sat sentry on his mare, watching as her mount carried her across the shallow river and beyond its pale clay banks to the country schoolhouse in the near distance. These few happy years ended when she went away to school. Like so many Indian children before her, she attended distant Indian boarding schools. The first was in Pierre, South Dakota, where she was a student for five years. For high school, she traveled to Lawrence, Kansas, to attend the well-known Haskell Indian School, from which Indian children had regularly run away due to loneliness, indigenous language deprivation, and militaristic discipline. By the time she was a part of that system, it was reforming. Richard Henry Pratt, who single-handedly invented the system along with its "Kill the Indian, save the man" modus operandi, had long since retired and more liberal, culturally sensitive outlooks prevailed. Discipline had eased, health care had improved, and the school's cemetery was not expanding as rapidly as it once had. Mom traveled back and forth alone by train to Lawrence.

"What do you remember most about Haskell?" I once asked her.

"I was always lonely."

In this, she was not alone.

In those post World War II photos, she and my handsome father are always smiling. They're radiant faces reflect youth, vitality and freedom. Freedom to them was travel, not being tied down to a town or a state was paramount. For years, they moved where dad found work as an electrician until the year of my three kindergartens. Then, after the visit to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, they decided to take up permanent residence near dad's people. The whole concept of travel changed dramatically for us thereafter. That's not to say that it ended. But, the gypsy days were over. Now travel was most often trips to Escanaba and occasionally to Iron Mountain to visit our paternal aunts, uncles and cousins. Mary and I much preferred the Escanaba weekends.

Uncle George's farm always felt like home. His youngest daughter, Lynn, is a year older than I and like her dad, generous and thoughtful. About the time Lynn began junior high school, her dad bought her a horse. He was a handsome chestnut and white paint named Dusty. Along with Lynn's friend Mary, who lived down the road and owned a horse too, the four of us split ourselves up between the two horses and spent hours riding horseback in the woods and fields that surrounded my uncle's farm.

It was my turn to ride Dusty as fast as possible across the field directly behind Uncle George's hulking grey barn. Over the years, this particular field had been plowed perfectly flat and planted with various crops, including my favorite, green beans. Aunt Rose could cream green beans picked fresh from the field in a way that made them taste as delicious as any lobster dinner I've savored since. More recently, the barn field had

been used as a grazing field for milk cows. Dusty liked to canter and it never took much encouragement to bring him to a full gallop. Lynn's hand-tooled Western saddle was gathering cobwebs in the barn and I was riding bareback, as we most often did. At the far edge of the field, where the branches of chestnuts and maples overhung the wire fence, I pressed my bare heels into his flanks and spoke to him. "Giddyup, Dusty!" He pushed off his rear legs in a robust dash. Luckily, the fingers of one of my hands were entwined in his long, coarse mane and the other held the thick, black reins of the bridle tight enough that I didn't drop them as I struggled to balance myself and remain astride while he settled into his rocking gait. I was just getting comfortable as the summer wind sailed my long, heavy mane of black hair behind me when things suddenly changed. Amid an open gallop, Dusty was spooked by something only he perceived. He threw his long, powerful legs directly out in front of him, effectively braking all forward motion except mine. The brown hair of his mane slid through my fingers easily and I naturally released the reins as I sailed over the horse's lowered neck and head. We'd talked about this. Lynn, the Marys, and I had discussed the possibility of falling off one of the horses while it was running full tilt. Now Lynn's words chanted in my head. Tuck and roll. Tuck and roll. I gained a fetal position just beyond Dusty's head and met the ground with my rounded back skidding across the grassy field on my favorite orange cotton tank top. I made what seemed like one complete revolution across the ground before I began to unfurl. Having sprawled near the middle of the open field, I landed just beyond an impressively large cowpie. I crawled over onto all fours and began gagging for breath; I'd had the wind knocked out of me. The Marys and Lynn raced up to me on foot in what seemed like a flurry of dust since my face was hanging only inches from the ground.

"Are you okay?"

"Are ya hurt?"

"Stand up! Can you?"

"Let me see! Are ya alright?"

No! I'm not alright! I yelled in my mind. *I'm not breathing yet and it must be five minutes since I bounced off the ground like a boulder!*

Finally, a deep gulp of air and then two more furtive intakes. My lungs burned.

"Wow! That's the biggest grass stain I've ever seen. It covers yer whole back. Might not ever come out. Ya sure yer okay?"

"Dusty, here boy! It's okay. Yer alright now. Here boy, c'mon. Let's go home."

"Best get back up on him, Grace. That's what they say. I'll lead him home. Why don't you just sit on him? I'll lead you home."

The trips that Mom, Mary, and I looked forward to most were the annual excursions to our maternal grandparents' home in South Dakota. Mom called it "going to see the folks." The folks, Vern and Grace, still lived on the reservation, but had moved from one small town to another. Their last home was in a tiny, partially boarded-up and completely dust-blown hamlet called Mission. We usually went in September during ring-necked pheasant hunting season. Dad had always been an avid deer and bird hunter. For many years he shot the daily limit of pheasant for three or four consecutive days in the harvested, dried remnants of local corn fields. Mary and I occasionally accompanied him

to work as a team in the hunt. We crashed loudly through the crisp, brittle landscape driving the birds ahead of us until they rose pointed and vibrant into flight like skeet into the path of skilled rifle shots. The cleaned, dressed, and frozen birds filled our freezer well into winter. Bags of shimmery iridescent green and dappled brown feathers languished in our basement for years, and were given away not long before I finally decided I could have used them in jewelry-making and dried wreath construction. Recently, when we've gone back, I've scanned the rolling prairie looking for them and been rewarded with glimpses of the gleaming males ornamenting fence posts. The females are nearly invisible in their camouflage plumage.

Meanwhile, Mom and the grands sat in the small living room of the tiny, white clapboard house reminiscing and telling stories of earlier times. Grandpa drove the few blocks to the post office each day more as a social habit than the necessity of fetching mail. When Mary and I accompanied him in his ancient Rambler, he made additional stops at a couple of the local places. He'd park off the highway on the one side street with a few businesses. In the post office, we'd meet someone he knew.

"Who are these young ladies?" someone would ask.

"These are Sis's daughters, my Michigan granddaughters," Grandpa would answer.

"Well, well. They're tall, aren't they? And good-looking. They look like city girls. Are they?"

"Yes," he'd say.

Mary and I would look up at Grandpa hearing the smile in his voice. We didn't think of ourselves as city girls. He was proud of us. We felt it in his gaze and in his gentle ways.

But, we were fidgety, anxious to be moving on.

"Grandpa?" I'd say quietly.

"Yes?" he'd answer without hesitation.

"Can we go to Abourezk's now?"

"Sure. Let's mosey." He'd smile down on us from beneath the halo of his shading cowboy hat.

Our small hands disappeared beyond the wrists in his impossibly large ones and walking so near him, I'd smell grass, soil, horses and work. We'd cross the wide side street content, together.

Our preferred destination was Abourezk's General Store. There was nothing like it in Marquette. Owned for years by a Lebanese American family of merchants and lawyers, Abourezk's carried an impressive selection of goods; our favorites were the leather cowboy boots and Stetson hats. The oversized boxes of boots towered far above our heads and we imagined having to cut holes in a ten-gallon hat's crown in order to see. We were annually impressed with our grandfather's own collection of worn, sloping cowboy boots. Well into his sixties, he was still breaking horses in the area. He was tall and walked with the swinging, rounded gait of a man more comfortable in a saddle than anywhere else. He pressed vintage silver dollars into our hands when our mother wasn't looking and encouraged us to keep them rather than spend them. The time spent with

mom's folks flashed by too quickly. Some of the saddest memories of my childhood are our departures from my grandparents' home to return to Michigan.

Each year Mom cried as she clung to first her mother and then her father. In the car, tears coursed down her face for many miles as we headed northeast. I'm sure each time she wondered if it might be the last time she saw one or the other of her parents alive. I can't recall ever having thought about losing my grandparents. They always seemed healthy and vital to me. Years later, I was traveling across the plains with a boyfriend on a business trip he was making to California. We drove out of our way to drop in on them for a few hours, arriving at 5:00 a.m. and departing before 7:00 a.m., but not before I prevailed upon them to pull their coats on and stand out in their sparse yard in the early morning sunlight for a snapshot. They both look uncomfortable. Grandma Grace pulls her muted plaid raincoat around her, attempting to cover her worn housedress underneath. Grandpa Vern stares off to his left, as Mom says he always did in photographs. It was the last picture ever taken of the two of them together. Shortly thereafter, my grandfather suffered a massive coronary and was airlifted to Rapid City, only to be pronounced dead on arrival. Tears well in Mom's eyes when her gaze finds that photograph in my living room. She examines it each time almost as if she's never seen it before.

They are buried in the Indian cemetery in Mission. Mom used to worry about it being so overgrown, clogged with hearty weeds, uncared for compared to local, manicured graveyards. She's not mentioned this for some time now. But still, it's time to go to them again. We'd park just beyond the ramshackle fence and carefully step around the mounds accompanying headstones. I will stand with my back to the town's main

street and look out beyond the plots over the prairie dog inhabited, adjacent property. But eventually my gaze will return to the burial places at my feet and I will remember my longing to lie on my grandfather's grave and whisper to him. He always heard me. He was always a wonderful listener. The reservation homeland and our ancestors call to us. We are drawn onto the road to travel once again, to journey back across the lush, swaying grasslands, over the buttes and sandhills and badlands, back to the bones of the ancestors, back home.

Second Opinion

Sunday, March 5, 2006

9:45 a.m. ET

My eighty-four year-old father, Wilbert Roy Chaillier, inches his tan Toyota Camry out of the driveway at my parents' quiet neighborhood home in Marquette, Michigan. He, my sister Mary, and I prepare to begin the four hundred forty mile drive to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. We'd planned to be on the road shortly after 9:00 a.m., but I ran behind our scheduled timing, which happens too often, and called my parents' house at 9:30 a.m. to say that I was in my car, on my way across town.

"It's about time," Dad said, "we *will* leave without you."

"No you won't," I say, "We have plenty of time. We'll still be in Rochester long before dark."

Off to our usual surly start, I think to myself. Rushed and defensive, I choose to squelch my fault in the matter, along with any meaner commentary.

A half hour later, in ten degree weather, our Mom, Wilma Giroux Chaillier, hugs her coatless, trembling frame inside the garage as she waves us on our way. I recall her mother standing in my grandparents' yard on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation looking much the same years ago. She's decided not to come this time since she was uncomfortable in Dad's car the last time they made this trip. Mom is two years older than

Dad, has had two knee replacements and struggles bending and lifting her legs through the Camry's smaller door openings. She's accustomed to those in her Buick. Dad is a shotgun driver who refuses to sit in the back seat. Mom was cold sitting in the back of the Camry throughout most of the last trip but that vehicle is the newest, most reliable of any we own. That trip and this one are attempts to confirm the ongoing existence and course of treatment for the bladder cancer that Dad is being treated for here in Marquette. Mary repeated Mom's litany of travel complaints to me and, at first, I thought it best that she stay home. Then we heard Val's story.

Two days ago, Mary told me about our friend Valerie's mom having fallen in her home. When her husband attempted to help her up, he fell too and both elders lay on the floor for twenty hours, until Val finally found them after repeated, futile attempts to reach them by phone. Luckily, they're both recovering.

The second to the last thing I say to Mom, before goodbye is, "Don't fall down. We won't be here to find you." She's tripped on a rug and fallen face first down the basement steps bruising herself from chin to toes, twisted too quickly for her slowing feet to keep pace with her lively body and tumbled sideways onto a still-sturdy hip, leaned backwards too far just out of reach of a counter and sat down hard on her linoleum kitchen floor, and plunged down on icy surfaces around town several different winters, yet to date, she has never broken a bone or been seriously injured enough to require an overnight hospital stay. Not yet. The women in our family are inclined to slip on ice and snow, step from curbs off balance, sink into soft earth, lose our balance and topple over. I've told people, "We fall down."

We'll be gone for a minimum of three days and calling Mom daily.

10:45 a.m. ET

"Well, is anybody gettin' hungry yet?" Dad asks. "Yes," Mary and I answer in unison. Dad pulls into Elmer's Family Restaurant in Escanaba. Born in Escanaba and raised in the nearby farming settlement of Schaffer, he likes stopping in Esky. We might run into a relative or two, though that doesn't happen now. Instead, we stoke up, eating hearty, calorie-and fat-laden egg, meat, potato and bread breakfasts surrounded by strangers.

I walk behind Dad across the parking lot as we return to the car. At just over six feet, his bearing is straight, upright. He carries a trim frame beneath his International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers' windbreaker and an angular face with brown eyes under a denim baseball cap. He has only thin, graying wisps left of what used to be a thick shock of black, wavy hair that we were told as children was a part of his French Canadian heritage. He now chooses daily from a wardrobe of baseball caps to cover and protect his balding head. I recall a black and white photograph taken of him in his twenties. He slouches in the confidence of compellingly attractive youth, wearing a white t-shirt that contrasts his striking blue-black hair. His smile is dashing, playful, carefree. He has the look of sturdy, peasant stock. After having worked as an electrician for almost forty years, Dad retired from the Escanaba local in 1987. I'm surprised to see that he's wearing pinstriped dress slacks today. Clothes look good on him, though he rarely chooses to wear the good clothes he has. I gaze beyond him at shifting sky, hoping vaguely for good traveling weather.

But the previously clear, azure sky has clouded over while we were in the restaurant. We drive out of Escanaba toward Menominee and Marinette, sister cities on

the Michigan and Wisconsin state line. Tight, steely, Brillo pad bushes protrude out of snow banks glazed by yesterday's thaw. Farther along, grey skeletal stands of poplar interweave with white pine and golden-green tamarack. It's Sunday; traffic is light allowing us to make good time. Dad drives at an almost constant sixty miles per hour. His John Denver CD fills the car with the singer's lilting folk songs, tunes that I've not heard in years. Though I can't remember the name of a single song when asked, I can sing along as I am now when the mnemonic melody conjures words from an incomprehensible memory reserve. I recall nearly every word, absentmindedly caress the lyrics, and write as my IBM ThinkPad toasts my upper legs in the chilly back seat. Mom was right about sitting back here.

On M-35 south of Escanaba, frozen Little Bay de Noc blends with whitened horizon through sparse, stripped trees. Dad says, "I'll never forget an electrician I knew who owned the Brotherton Cabins somewhere along here." I can't recall ever having heard of the Brotherton Cabins and I think suddenly that Dad doesn't tell many stories anymore either. I listen carefully.

"One time a tourist was walking his dog along the beachfront properties. The electrician approached him and said, "Don't you ever bring that dog back on my property." When the tourist passed back by on his way home, he led the dog through the water to skirt the electrician's property. The electrician came out with a loaded gun and shot the dog. The dog owner sued and tied up the electrician in court for the next year. The dog had been flown to Milwaukee for surgery and the owner added all the costs of the dog's treatment into the lawsuit. That shooting ended up costing the electrician a lot of money."

"Good," says my sister, who is owned by two dogs and five cats.

11:30 a.m. CT

Along with bladder cancer, Dad was diagnosed years ago with macular degeneration, which is the leading cause of vision loss and blindness in Americans aged 65 and older. It is a degenerative condition of the macula, which is the part of the retina responsible for the sharp, central vision needed to read or drive. His condition has worsened considerably since he was diagnosed. He can no longer read without both his glasses and a magnifying glass in bright light. Still, he continues to drive. He makes me the nervous passenger that I'm otherwise not. I am fretful and irritated as long as he's behind the wheel. I feel unsafe, at risk. I don't think he should be driving at all, but none of us have dared to tell him yet.

About fifteen miles north of Green Bay, Dad pulls over; he and Mary switch places. She maneuvers a mid-sized truck many miles around the Great Lakes system working for US Fish and Wildlife in its Lamprey Control Program. Having witnessed some bizarre accidents, she is a watchful, defensive driver who pilots a vehicle sensibly. I am much more comfortable with her behind the wheel. I think of all the car trips we've logged, probably more than most families. Mom and Dad were always planning driving escapes and adventures. Mary and I developed a devotion to travel by motor vehicle before kindergarten. It still amuses us. We're at home moving down the road. We eat, sleep, read, study, type, tell stories, sing along with the radio and we probably don't stop as often as many other travelers. We're inclined to keep rolling. Even now, I find my cocoon in the back seat comforting. I feel oddly content, considering the circumstances,

lulled into a sense of well-being with my wool coat nested around me, my travel pillow supporting my neck, my water bottle within arm's length and the countryside rushing by just beyond the window. Momentarily, I'm even able to forget why I'm taking this trip and lose myself in the chilled grandeur of winter's final throes. But, not for long.

12:38 p.m. CT

We pass through Green Bay and Appleton, and then at Algoma we turn onto Route 21, head west and track through rolling hills landscape. Silos, farms, machinery garages, and country homes edge fields surrounded by stands of stark trees. Every third or fourth farmstead is abandoned, peeling, listing sideways, gradually drooping down. Newer out buildings are cold, hard, weather resistant metal. For several miles, old, red barns hug the road at intervals on either side. Their wooden boards are often split and frayed, yet they sport fresh paint and manicured, pampered good looks, obviously treasured and cared for in their maturity. No movement snares the eye across the land.

Then Dad says, "It looks like we're comin' into something. It's hazy up ahead."

Mary says, "Oh, yeah."

I look up and my heart sinks. A half mile later we drive into dense snow that slicks the pavement and begins to accumulate. Residents of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan recognize various types of snow and can predict a snowfall's outcome after many lingering winters of raw, pale experience. This sort is weighty, sodden, clinging. We've passed several plows when, suddenly, the car jerks and we angle into a skid. I jolt upright, inhale a ragged gasp, give away my terror as Mary briefly fights to gain control. As quickly as we fishtailed, the tires find purchase and she straightens the Camry into its

lane. I am doubly thankful that my steady, careful sister is at the wheel. Deja vu sweeps through me. The only bad car accident I was ever involved in happened in driving snow conditions. My ex-husband and I were told we were lucky to have survived a head-on collision on US 41. Though the front end of Jim's slant-six Valiant was accordioned into a three-foot section in front of the dash and the car was totaled, miraculously, neither of us was seriously injured. I've rarely thought of how this brief feather's touch of death may have affected me as a driver or rider, but it stirs me now and I shiver.

3:40 p.m. CT

Just beyond Lacrosse, Wisconsin, we cross the swift, dark Mississippi River and pass over the Minnesota state line. Road conditions improve. The pavement curves downward cutting into carved hills hung with drapey, frozen waterfalls on one side. The land drops away just beyond the roadbed on the other side and is patched with trees and thickets hued in black to white. Again, here, as so often happens, I expect to see leather-colored horses sat with Indians wrapped in furred skins, melting into camouflage vegetation. I feel them, long for them. My eyes narrow, squint. They're there – angle and edge, stillness and wariness, waiting, watching, just at the periphery of a descendant's vision.

We run for half a mile through a flood plain depression and then begin climbing, gaining altitude. Just as quickly as we dropped into the valley of the Mississippi, we round up and out of it to continue west at the commencement of the Great Plains, though here gentler hills hump and roll on. Lowlands are serrated with thick stands of naked hardwood. The snow disappears. We've driven out of it. Hazy dampness looms in the

distance all around. This used to be buffalo terrain. Now these tracks of pavement and fence lines run over it instead.

4:35 p.m. CT

I doze in my refined cocoon, then wake, attuned to the car slowing. Chain restaurants and strip malls surround us. We've arrived.

Mary says, "Do you think we should eat now so once we check in, we'll be in for the night?"

"Sounds good to me," I say.

"Well, there are restaurants all along here," she says, "everything from Burger King to the Outback."

"I like the Outback," I say.

Dad hasn't heard anything we've said. He wears a hearing aid in his right ear and still struggles to comprehend what's spoken around him, repeating phrases that bear little resemblance to what's actually said. He's owned several, wearing some out, losing others. I retrieved one out of the wastepaper basket next to his chair in their living room. He'd apparently brushed it off the lamp table while reaching for something. Since he doesn't hear many conversations, decisions like restaurant preference are made more often these days without his input and he seems okay with that. I think he's glad that both Mary and I have come with him and will defer to our choices in eating establishments. Mary made this same trip with Mom and Dad in early February. The last time they were here, as he does every day, Dad took a baby aspirin on the morning he was to have a procedure, effectively disallowing its performance. Dad did not want to stay another day,

so the work was rescheduled for March 6. Mary was the primary driver then, as she is now. I am her relief, driving only when pressed. It's is not my idea of a good time; as a matter of fact, if I had my choice, I'd not drive at all, ever. I much prefer the lesser responsibility and tension of any passenger seat in motor vehicles. I prefer going along just for the ride.

Mary and I thrashed out this trip shortly after she returned from the last one.

"I'm going," she said, "but I think you should go too. It'd be good for you to learn your way around the town and the hospital with me, in case I can't go and you have to bring Dad later on." I sighed. I'd been thinking that I'd offer to go and knew that I should, but I was dreading this trip. I've had a bad feeling about this cancer since Mom first told me about it. I immediately thought: *He'll never recover from this. It will kill him in the end.*

Monday, March 6, 2006

5:00 a.m. CT

The radio blares harsh, gritty music. Mary rolls over, slaps it into silence.

"God, that was obnoxious," I say.

"Yeah," she agrees, "This is a bad radio. I couldn't find one station that it picked up without static and the volume is either loud or not on at all." Once again, I think about the L L Bean travel alarm clocks that I've been gazing at in their catalog, coveting, for over a year now. I vow to order a couple; they'll be worth many times their twenty dollar price tag, if only we're never shocked awake like this again.

While Mary is in the shower, I begin asking Dad some questions that have been on my mind. I'm surprised that he is open, perhaps even anxious to discuss his condition. I recall another time he surprised me, long ago.

In 1980 I was living in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago. In mid-May I received a letter from Dad. I imagine that he may have been as surprised to find himself writing to me and actually mailing the letter as I was to receive it. He began:

> *Dear Gracie,* (He had never called me Gracie to my face in my lifetime.)
>
> *This oughta shock you – getting a letter from your mean old man. I just thought I'd sit and write you a letter. It sure seems like a long time since I seen you. When are you coming up here for a visit?*

He continued for several pages with news about my grandmother, his work on the house and a prizewinning tomato plant that he was growing and then near the end came this:

> *Ya know Grace, I'm truly sorry we didn't have a more loving relationship with each other while you were growing up at home. I know now that it's my fault. I felt strict discipline was important but heaven knows that's not nearly as important in a family as love. Of course, I really did love you all the time, but what good was that if I didn't tell you. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive all my meanness.*

He then closed and added a postscript asking me to travel home with Mary who was coming through Chicago on her way home from Missouri where she was living with her second husband.

I remain shocked by his letter to this day. Dad's never mentioned it. Every once in awhile, I reread it. He was always aloof, emotionally crippled, unavailable. He's like that still. He said very little to me that wasn't negative when I was growing up. I inherited his sharp tongue that I struggle to soften or, at least, to bite. More often than not I'm successful, but I am sometimes shocked at the cruel verbalizations that fall out of my mouth. It happens most often when I'm overtired and not thinking clearly. And it didn't help that I was, unlike Mary, a natural transgressor. I've told a select few people over the years that I grew up with a biological male parent, but felt I never really had a father. He supported us financially, but neglected us otherwise. And he and Mom bickered and battled often. She constantly complained about his treatment of her and became embittered over the years. The letter, which I'll always keep, is a side of him that's hidden, a better alter ego, though he is mellowing slightly now that he's in his mid-eighties. I wonder if cancer isn't changing him. I continue to hope it is.

The bladder cancer was diagnosed two years ago by Dr. Mering at Marquette Urology Group. As the treatment progressed, Dad asked around town and heard some stories about other people's experiences that worried him. These concerns, coupled with treatments that did not seem to be as effective as he'd hoped, prompted Dad to ask Dr. Mering for a referral to the Mayo Clinic. Dad says, "Mering said, 'No problem, I'll see that it's set up for you.'" But, his attitude shifted to iciness. He turned on his heel and

immediately left the room with no further discussion. For him, whether Dad was ready or not, the appointment had come to an end.

This behavior concerns Dad, since Mering's practice is the only one in the area that sees patients with his condition, it is the only game in town; not even his associates see patients who suffer from the condition Dad has. Dad worked thereafter with a nurse and front desk personnel who set and informed him about appointments. He's lost confidence and trust in his local physician, also because, at one point in his treatments, a nurse performed a procedure on him that previously had been carried out only by the doctor. The nurse's efforts resulted in considerably less pain than he'd previously experienced. "He is rough," Dad says. This, from a man I've always thought of as sturdy and tough.

Dad explains the procedure that will take place today as best he can. Since it doesn't involve incisions and is laparoscopic, it's considered to be minimally invasive by operating room standards. However, a Hopkins rod lens system connected to a tiny video camera, a fiber optic cold light source, and thin instruments are inserted up his penis to search for malignant growth areas. If they're found, the area is scraped and then bombarded with cell killing fluid that is clamped off in the area for half an hour before it's allowed to drain off. He's been through this several times before and says, "It hurts like hell after they're done." Not having experienced the pain associated with childbirth and always having been healthy, I can't even imagine. One of the problems that often follows the procedure is the resumption of urination. After one of the procedures performed on him in Marquette, Dad was told to wear a catheter for two days. He only lasted one before he removed it himself.

We head down to the lobby from our fifth floor room to wait for the shuttle that circles throughout the day between the hospital complex and local hotels and motels. Twenty minutes later we enter Mayo Clinic's Rochester Methodist Hospital at the Eisenberg Building, and head toward the admissions desk. A friendly, efficient clerk introduces us to an escort who sweeps us along in his wake up to the third floor, eventually handing us over to nursing personnel. The escort is an enthusiastic advocate for the hospital. "This is the best medical facility in the world," he says confidently as he extends his six-foot frame up straighter and taller. Doubtful by nature, I wonder about this. When I do some research later at home, I discover that *US News and World Report* online ranks Mayo as the fifth best in a field of fifty United States hospitals for cancer care and research. Perhaps not the best, but very good. We feel lucky to have a facility of this caliber relatively near our home. I'm thankful that this appointment happened to be scheduled at the beginning of semester break for Northern Michigan University where I teach and attend classes. I am working during the trip, but I won't miss classes. That may not always be the case. Mary and I have discussed the care of our parents as they age and I told her recently that we're lucky to have one another, that we're both living in Marquette and willing to be engaged in the process. I've heard stories all my life about siblings who ignore their parents' elder care citing distance and a litany of more pressing obligations. We've agreed to do the best we can together.

In Dad's room an anesthesiology staff member preps him for an IV and a young nurse with a name badge that reads Susan Scanlon, RN, is asking Dad a battery of questions. She looks him in the eye when speaking to him and then turns to type his answers into a notebook computer on a high, rolling stand. She is unhurried, kind, patient

with Dad who doesn't offer any additional information. When she asks if he has a living will, he says, "Yes, but I only have one copy and I won't be giving that one out to anyone." She gently explains that the staff has a copier here on the floor and they would return his document immediately.

I say, "Should we plan to bring a copy the next time we come?"

"Yes," she says, smiling softly, "Mayo Clinic procedure requires that we have a copy on file."

"Okay," I say, "We'll bring it next time."

"That'll be fine," says Susan.

She asks Dad to repeat back to her what the doctor has told him will be happening today. He does so in part and then she continues filling in the blanks of information that he has either forgotten or didn't hear. Mary and I are grateful to hear her skilled presentation of the procedure.

"Are you able to tell us approximately how long the procedure will take?" I ask. Susan attempts an answer that, in the end, sounds like we could leave the building anytime between 12:30 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.

9:15 a.m. CT

Dad is wheeled toward the elevators for the ride down to the surgical theater. Mary and I relocate from his room into the family waiting room. It's small, pie-shaped and lit and decorated like many Midwest living rooms with soft, table lamp lighting. I pull a folding chair away from a puzzle covered card table, prop my legs and my laptop up, and type on. A little later, an attendant steps over the threshold.

"Would you like coffee or a soft drink?" he asks.

"My sister's gone across the street to Starbucks for lattes and muffins."

He cocks his head and smiles. "Well, I can't compete with that."

Some time later, he returns and again has no takers for beverages. He turns to me, "What are you so busy with?"

"I'm writing this experience – our trip here to Mayo."

"Ohhh," he says, surprise and interest shifting across his face.

In under two hours, another clerk steps into the room and says Dad is in recovery. She is interested in our name and I tell her a little about it. She's friendly, amusing, obviously used to dealing with and easing worried relatives. She goes on to tell me about her Hispanic last name and that down south she has been carded since she looks like the last person that would have a Mexican name. We laugh; I thank her, and appraise her as another person here who is good at her job. I call Mom for the second time today to give her an update. The relief in her voice is palpable; I say I'll call again soon. Fifteen minutes later Susan steps into the room and asks if we know that Dad is in recovery. Mary and I say, "Yes, thanks." She's out of my line of vision when Mary says, "We should have asked if the doctor would be coming up to the room so we could ask questions."

"Yes, we should have." I'm not multitasking as well as I ought to.

11:55 a.m. CT

Though Susan tells us that Dad will be in recovery for an hour, he is wheeled past the waiting room after forty-five minutes. I grab all my scattered paraphernalia and lurch

toward his room in a balancing act, well behind Mary who simply closes her paperback and glides away. We perch in compact institutional chairs out of the way as Susan skirts Dad's bed in a futile attempt to make him comfortable. He's having none of it. She questions him, as do we each time she leaves the room. He is lucid and himself, a fairly uncommunicative charter member of the Grumpy Old Men's Club. We ask how he feels and he curtly spits, "Okay."

In a clipped, tight voice he says, "The doctor told me that I have to wear a catheter for seven days. I want to know why. That's too long." His face is pinched in a deep frown and his thin, colorless lips are so taut they're barely there. Anger flows off him, a bad vibe.

I say, "We'll ask the nurse if he's coming up here and we'll talk to him about it. It must be important."

Susan returns again with a catheter kit and begins carefully instructing our seething father about the larger bag that he'll be connected to throughout the night, the smaller bag that will be attached to his leg during the day and the cleaning and care of all the parts of the system.

Dad keeps repeating, "I don't understand why I have to have this for seven days. That's too long."

Mary asks if the doctor is coming up to talk to us and Susan says, "I'll check." We learn he'll be here soon.

1:00 p.m. CT

Igor Frank, MD, steps into the room followed by an entourage wearing scrubs. He introduces the resident and intern he has in tow. I tell him that Dad is dressing in the bathroom. I'm glad we have a moment with the doctor without our father.

"He is very resistant to the idea of wearing a catheter for seven days," I say, "He had to go through this for a very short time once before and he knows what it entails."

"It's important," Dr. Frank says, "I'll explain it to all of you when your Dad steps out."

We are told that Dad needs to drink ten ten-ounce glasses of water that will flush through his bladder to cleanse an area where Dr. Frank has done some deep scraping of abnormal cell formations. Dad hears it with us, but just doesn't want to have to deal with emptying a bag constantly, let alone cleaning two of them. Drinking the quantities of water that are being recommended will fill the bag even more quickly, necessitating more frequent emptying. He's never drunk water like this day after day and he won't now. He chooses to be resistant and uncooperative. He either doesn't hear or chooses not to acknowledge the more important information about persistent anomalies. I think about denial. Is his focus on the catheter a diversionary tactic?

"It's only seven days," I say. "It'll be over before you know it." But, I'm thinking what a hassle this will be for him, beyond even the physical discomfort.

Dr. Frank explains that tissue samples have been sent to the pathology department and he expects the results tomorrow afternoon. Mary says, "We'll be on the road tomorrow. Can we call on Wednesday for results?" The doctor answers yes and a time to call is set.

Susan brings Dad ice cream, toast, orange juice and water. He finishes all of it in short order, anxious to leave. A urologist sent by Dr. Frank comes in to clear blood clots from the catheter's tubing and then Dad gets dressed again and we seat him in a wheelchair for our departure.

Tuesday, March 7, 2006

5:00 a.m. CT

The music-alarm-clock-from-hell goes off again. We forgot to turn it off and even though we've been awake and talking for fifteen or twenty minutes, it is still nerve-grating. While Mary's in the shower, Dad says, "I didn't sleep at all – just laid in bed all night."

"How come? Were you in pain?"

"No," he says, "I roll over a lot in bed and I couldn't move tied to that bag that had to hang in the trash can." I'm a side sleeper constantly switching sides throughout the night too; I can understand his frustration.

"Maybe you can snooze in the car," I say.

We pack and load the car, settle the bill, and drive to Perkins for breakfast. After a dash through Wal-Mart for a few items, we're finally ready to leave town.

8:45 a.m. CT

I glance at my watch as we're driving out of Rochester and realize that we're getting on the road at the same time that we left Marquette. I consider the possibility of arriving home at the same time we got here, but there's the time change and then Mary and Dad decide that we'll stop at the Chip-In Casino not far from Escanaba like they did last time.

We'll pull in late. Tomorrow is my birthday. No one's mentioned it and they probably won't. I'm accustomed to it and won't remind them.

The skies are brighter today, though still overcast. Driving weather is mild and we are quiet. I gaze out at the rushing landscape and think of all the times when we were growing up that someone our family knew suffered with or died from cancer. Mom fears the big C. Mary and I have been aware of this particular dread as long as I can remember. She is frightened now – for Dad and at being left behind in a big house, alone. Our return trip feels swift. We pull into the casino parking lot hungry and ready for diversion, eager to hit the slots.

We all make varying contributions to the Hannahville Potawatomi Nation at their gaming establishment. It's dark when we finally reach Mom and Dad's Shiras Hills' driveway. They stand in their open garage as Mary and I unload luggage and bags from the Camry and reload them into our own vehicles. I am reminded again of our grandparents standing in their gritty yard, waving goodbye, long ago. We're both anxious to get home. Mary says she'll be facing an angry menagerie at home and is eager to get them all fed and settled down.

Wednesday, March 8, 2006

1:10 p.m. ET

Mary has a Wednesday night class just down the corridor in Whitman Hall from my office in the Center for Native American Studies. She usually stops in, but since its semester break she calls to tell me that the pathology report has been delayed and Dr.

Frank's office staff doesn't know why. Though no one in my family acknowledged my birthday, my considerate coworkers presented me with a cake and cards.

Sunday, March 12, 2006

6:55 p.m. ET

Dad tells me on the phone that he called Dr. Frank's office repeatedly through last week. The test results are still not back.

"I'll call 'em tomorrow and tell 'em that I want to speak to him as soon as possible. I'll get some information," he says. I wonder if he really wants to hear the results.

He's made an appointment to have Dr. Mering's office remove the catheter, but they can't see him until Wednesday. By the time it's removed, he will have had it in place for ten days. He says it's really bothering him, but he sounds in good spirits. He tells me about a new international baseball league game that he's watching on TV. Baseball has always been one of his passions since it was broadcast exclusively on radio.

"I'll talk to you soon," I say.

"Okay, Grace," he says. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I say, and think of partings, farewells.

Monday, March 13, 2006

2:20 p.m. ET

"The report's back," Mary says to me over the phone.

"What's the verdict?"

"There's no cancerous growth beyond the original problem area. Dr. Frank did scrape and bathe the same area again but the site is contained so far. Dad will have to be checked at regular intervals from here on out."

"Well that sounds hopeful, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it does."

She doesn't sound convinced. Neither am I.

The Business of Word Dancing

> Humor is self-defense on the rez. You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they'll listen or laugh.
>
> Sherman Alexie

He appears just as I'd envisioned him – tall, dark, handsome, and Native. A vision that doesn't seem to come true often enough. Sherman Alexie strides confidently to the podium in the Elijah Elk Cultural Center, near the border of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe's Isabella Reservation in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. He wears fashionable, black pinstriped slacks, a solid black, double-breasted, sport coat – both of worsted wool – and a black and white striped shirt open at the neck. Stylishly dressed Indian males are as rare as large tribes on the eastern seaboard. I feel in the right place at the right time, lucky, I suppose, but not in the way that would make me itch to hurry back to the sprawling gaudiness of the tribe's Soaring Eagle Casino just down the road. This good fortune feels more like hero worship, and I can't say I've experienced it many times before. I pull my rapt interest away from his arresting appearance, gaze at the crowd, and feel relief that I am only one of many fixated on this strikingly good looking, successful Native author.

"I'm glad to be here with all you Indians," Alexie says, "and the white people who study us." An impish grin slides easily across a dusky face as black eyes rake the crowd. He leans forward from the waist making eye contact here, there, and wraps long,

thin, brown fingers around the edges of a wobbly, wooden podium. “I’ve been introduced in the past as Sherman Alexie, the Coeur d’Alene Indian from Spokane, Washington, and the white guy next to me is introduced as the Indian expert. I turn to him, ‘So, whaddya know about me?’ I ask.” Alexie says he’s “doped up” on cold medication and doesn’t know how long he’ll last, sending a wave of agitation through the assembly of two hundred plus sardined along lengthy tables in the community gathering room. In the few places left to gain it, this announcement has won him unmitigated attention. We’ve just finished a traditional feast meal of venison, wild rice, squash, green beans, coffee and much more prepared by local tribal members.

“It helps having some of grandma’s homemade soup here tonight,” Alexie continues, referring to the wild rice soup that provides the same medicinal sustenance and warm, fuzzy beneficence for Indians that chicken noodle does for our mainstream counterparts. “All I need now is someone to rub Vicks VapoRub on my chest.” He pauses, scans the back of the room. “Gordon?” he says, addressing Gordon Henry, an equally appealing White Earth Chippewa tribal member, often-published writer, and English professor at Michigan State University. “I only bring it up because you’ve done it before,” Alexie continues.

“You weren’t s’posed to tell anybody about that,” Henry answers in kind. Shoulders heave and heads bounce in attempts at stifled laughter so as not to miss any part of *this* exchange. Some stretch and crane necks searching for Henry in the crowd to inspect his face. Teasing is a cultural expectation among Indian people, though not all of us have elevated it to an art form.

Since the two 1998 Sundance Film Festival awards and then mainstream success later that same year for his first film *Smoke Signals,* Alexie says, "My siblings have been asked what it was like to grow up with their comic brother Sherman." He laughs, shakes his head of thick, black, manicured hair and describes himself as "the morose kid who played *Dungeons and Dragons* in the basement alone." He says he was recently made proud by his son's braggadocio at having reached a crucial level in the game. He pulls his tall frame upright and thrusts out his well-attired chest, every bit the proud dad of a child who is following in his father's gaming footsteps.

Alexie has been criticized for mainsteaming *Smoke Signals,* a male buddy, road film in which Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) travels with Thomas Builds the Fire (Evan Adams) to retrieve Victor's father's cremated ashes near Phoenix, Arizona. Some accused Alexie of caving to Miramax, one of the multinational giants of film in order to achieve wider distribution. He says, "*Smoke Signals* is the Indian *Gone with the Wind.*" Though I'd not made this stunning comparison, it is essentially what I tell my students each semester when we view the film in our Native American Experience classes.

Smoke Signals is still by far the best known, largest grossing film that was produced, directed and starred in by American Indian people. "Steven Spielberg can't say that he's made a film that 99% of Jewish people have seen," Alexie continues. This has been the overwhelming popularity of *Smoke Signals* among tribal populations both on and off reservations. I've told my sister repeatedly, after she borrowed the copy I own and returned it without viewing it, "You are *the only* Indian who has never seen *Smoke Signals*."

Alexie openly admits to having gone mainstream, even to having tempered the darkness of the *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* short stories from which the screenplay evolved, in order to bring the film to a wider audience. He tells this audience that his 2002 film *The Business of Fancydancing* more accurately reflects the kind of filmmaker he considers himself to be.

Fancydancing, given the same title as Alexie's first book of poems published in 1992, remains an independent film that received limited distribution, mixed reviews even from Indian viewers (some very negative for its portrayal of reservation drug culture), and is still obscure. The film is the story of a rich, famous, gay Indian. Seymour Polatkin (Evan Adams), who seems to be living a dream life, shares his colonized Indian ironies with the world through poetry. Polatkin has an emotionally charged confrontation with friends during a visit to his reservation after a ten-year absence but remains unmoved by it. Some viewers had difficulty with the character's unresponsiveness.

An audience member here at the community center asks, "Did you even break even on that film?" Alexie's face shifts and changes as he pauses for a moment, contemplates, and finally answers, "Almost. Distributing *The Business of Fancydancing* was like the way we run our tribal politics – corruption and a whole lot of singing and dancing." Alexie is genuinely amused at this quip; he laughs uproariously at his own joke. Later, I am told that he has been seriously practicing the habits and conduct of a stand-up comedian, and I think he may need to consider laughing less at his own humor. But then, perhaps not; he so obviously loves to laugh and smile and both are infectious. He adds, "My wife says, 'You just made that film to show people that you could still be

irrelevant.' I love that woman." Again, the boyish grin. Gazing toward the back of the long room, he halts, switches, veers off in a different, old direction.

"I want to talk about stereotypes," Alexie announces. This is invariably a subject that captures the attention of many Native people, as he knows. "My work is not about stereotypes. It's about my experiences. Of all my family - brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, mom and dad - only three don't drink and two of those are recovering. I have one sister who never drank. I don't write about alcoholism because it's a stereotype; I write about it because it has overwhelmed my family and many people I know. But, at the same time, my children have never seen an Indian drink alcohol. We don't have alcohol in our home. We don't go places where it's served. They don't see people drinking. I grew up with it every day, as far back as I can remember, and my wife and I decided that our children would not live like that." Everyone in the room, it seems, has stopped breathing. All is suddenly dead quiet. Silence.

I am suspended, as are others, several, lingering seconds, in reflective recollection. Such are the statistics in Indian Country that we have relatives and friends, too many of them, who live at the bottoms of bottles of booze. And then, just as suddenly, Alexie breaks the spell and maneuvers his audience again.

"My dad died a few years back before he should have, the result of years of drinking. He was lying in a hospital bed that I was able to purchase for him to make him more comfortable at home near the end. He and my mom and I were watching TV when he called to me. 'Regret. Come over here.' Regret was my nickname all during my childhood. 'C'mere, Regret.' I stood up, walked to him as he held his arms out to me. I bent over my dad and he embraced me. 'I love you, Regret. I love you.' 'I love you too,

Dad,' I said, as he gazed over my shoulder at the *Smoke Signals* poster mounted on the kitchen door in the opposite wall. 'I've lived my life and it's near the end now. If I could change anything at all, I would have married Irene Bedard.' I stood and turned to see my mom positioned right next to Irene, who is centered on the poster between Adam and Evan, just behind her. Mom looked over her shoulder and she and I dissolved into laughter. By the time we recovered, dad had lapsed into a coma that he never came out of. So, my dad's last words were a punch line."

The comedy of that encounter comforts Alexie, as humor has eased Indian people for centuries. He returns again and again throughout his discourse to his dad's life and the stories he will always tell about him. *Smoke Signals* is also, in part, a story of father and son relationships and the nature of forgiveness inherent to those interactions. While Alexie's forgiveness of his father's often written about weakness and absenteeism due to alcoholism is evident, so is his determination not to walk that path with his own sons. He over imbibed while in college, but quit altogether for good with the publication of the *Fancydancing* poetry collection.

In his essay "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me," Alexie states, "I made a very conscious decision to marry an Indian woman, who made a very conscious decision to marry me. Our hope: to give birth to and raise Indian children who love themselves. That is the most revolutionary act possible." Sherman Alexie's revolution is a success so far. He has transformed himself and chosen, along with his wife, to live a family life very different from the lifestyle he came from. Literary success has made him a sought after commodity and he is using the rewards he receives to teach his children how to live drug free lives free of the pain and grief of substance abuse. As a writer, a husband, a father,

and an Indian man, he is recreating by example what Native Americans are and can be. Many of us watch him, captivated.

A Working Life

I worked in the flower business for more than three decades. It all began with a chance meeting. During the summer between my sophomore and junior years in high school, I waited tables at the Big Boy Restaurant in Marquette, Michigan. It was fast-paced, exhausting work and I lasted two months, opting to quit altogether when high school classes resumed the first week in September. The same time that I was hired, so was Louann Forsberg, who was sixteen years old like me. She quickly found that the job was not to her liking and quit after two weeks but, in the meantime, we became quite well acquainted.

Six years later, Louann and I ran into one another at the Nordic Theatre downtown. We'd spotted one another after the film ended, drifted together, and walked slowly out of the theatre chatting and catching up.

"My mom owns the new flower shop on Third Street, you know," she said.

"I know, I ordered my wedding flowers there."

"Oh, I must not have been working. Did you talk to Char?"

"Yeh, Char was great." Charlene Keller was the shop manager of Forsberg Flowers.

"So what are you doing now?"

"Our wedding is six weeks away, so that's what I'm up to. I just quit the Holiday Inn after two years as a wait staff person there and I thought I wouldn't even look until we get back from our honeymoon."

"Oh, where're you going?"

"To Florida. Our best man, Jim's cousin Paul, is stationed at the Marine base at Pensacola. We're going to stay at his rented beach house and he'll stay at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters on base."

"Nice. That sounds like a great getaway. You know, we need help at the flower shop for Mother's Day. Would you be interested?"

"I don't know anything about the flower business, but yes, I'm interested."

"Okay, I'll talk to mom and call you."

Forsberg Flowers was so busy the first day I worked there that someone taught me how to twist and wire ribbon into bows and I was left to that project for the remainder of the day. No one had time to train me further and the bows were needed for an enormous shipment of blooming plants that I was told are always good holiday sellers. Every once in awhile, Gail Forsberg, Louann's mother, Louann herself, or Char would check my pastel blue, pink, lavender, and yellow bow pile height and then return to their long lists of individual tasks. I had an opportunity to watch the trained employees race back and forth between the showroom sales floor, the design room, and the flower cooler while still performing my repetitive assignment. I was amazed at the continually ringing telephones, the volume of foot traffic in the store, the cha-chinging cash register, and the scurrying employees. Business steadily increased each day until Saturday when it finally began to slow down

mid afternoon. By this time, I had watered plants, swept floors, and condensed riotously colorful bunches of flowers into fewer and fewer buckets as they were used in the production of hundreds of fresh arrangements that were constantly being delivered and sold as cash and carry gifts from a well-stocked flower cooler. This first week at Forsberg's opened a new world to me. The flower business sells nature at its apex of beauty. Before I fully realized it, I was hooked.

I felt lucky to be kept on after the Mother's Day holiday and looked forward to being trained eventually as a floral designer. But first, as was the custom in this particular establishment, I was told that I needed to learn as much as possible about houseplants, including their names (botanical and common), their selection for light exposure, and their care, along with showroom display and upkeep, and selling everything from a single rose to an entire wedding or funeral to customers. All this was a prerequisite to moving into the back design area to learn the elements of flower arrangement construction. I often thought of the months and then years out front as paying my dues for the privilege of eventually working as a designer with a stem knife in hand, a natural projection of palm and fingers. Later, in other shops, I learned that design training was not always such an elevated prize to be earned.

And selling flowers naturally necessitates knowing their names, seasonal availability and expected vase life. Somewhere in this early process, I fell in love with the idea of knowing as much as possible about flowers. I read books and picked the brains of my coworkers and wholesale flower salespeople that drove into the Upper Peninsula from Wisconsin, absorbing every scrap of information I could access. Nearly three years later, after I had learned everything required of me about the store out front, I still was not

being scheduled in the design area. But, when it was quiet near the end of some days, one of the part time designers who knew how badly I wanted to learn began teaching me the rudiments of floral design. Years later, as I trained many young people, I told them how lucky I had been to be surreptitiously trained by a conscientious man only a few years older than me who would become a longtime friend, John Oberstar.

One day early on in my clandestine design training John turned away from a large funeral arrangement (probably red and white, as that was his favorite) he was finishing and said with a straight face, "If you can't drop a flower arrangement on the floor and have it all pretty much hold together, then you haven't constructed it well enough. Using heavier wire and more wide tape than you might think necessary will help offset the delivery person's rough handling." I witnessed over and over in the years that followed the harsh treatment that John spoke of that day. Often delivery people are on tight schedules. Their vehicle packing organization and rush sometimes overlooks consideration for the delicate nature of the product they handle. John stressed mechanics of construction that would help insure that the product that the customer first saw on their doorstep would provoke a smile. So I learned the basics from John and waited for an opportunity to move from the front of the store to the back. I thought it might have arrived when the business moved south on Third Street to its own newly built store at the corner of Third and Ohio Streets.

On the day of the actual move, nearly everyone was involved in the process of getting set up for business in the new location. I volunteered to stay behind in the old store and work on what is called the daily orders in the business – that is, all the flower and plant arrangements that have been sold for delivery or that will be picked up on that

day. My reasoning was if I could make Gail and Char aware that I could produce in the design area, they would reassign me to work where I longed to be. Unfortunately, they were not as impressed as I'd hoped and after the move I was disappointed to be sent back out into the front store area. Even though we were in a beautiful new store, I decided to keep my eyes open for another opportunity.

Eventually, an advertisement appeared in *The Mining Journal*, Marquette's daily newspaper, for a floral designer for Lutey's Flower Shop, the only other shop in town and the place where both Gail and Char had worked before Gail opened Forsberg's. Along with over sixty other hopefuls, I applied. I was one of six applicants who actually created a fresh arrangement and a corsage in a presentation interview and I was called several days later and offered the job.

Six months after I started as a full time designer at Lutey's, I told the owner, Fred Donckers, that I had more than stretched the truth when I'd said that I was well versed in all phases of floral design, having performed them at Forsberg's. But, I knew that with John's training and my confidence in my ability, I could walk in and handle employment as a floral designer. That is what I did.

"I would never have hired you if I had known you had so little design experience," Fred said.

"I know," I said, "that's why I lied to you. I knew I could do the work, but I also knew that you probably wouldn't give me the chance. Have you been disappointed by my work?"

"No, you're doing fine."

"Thanks. I knew I could and would."

I stayed at Lutey's for slightly less than two years and it hadn't taken long for my marriage to reach what Joan Didion calls the 'familiar season of divorce.' That'd been a different, preceding two years. Now the man I'd recently been living with had taken a job in the Chicago suburbs. We moved and lived together for only a year in Illinois but I remained in the area for sixteen more.

I worked at several flower shops while living in the northwest suburbs of Illinois. Every business had its own flavor and style. I wanted to sample different ones, observe how they were run, become familiar with their clientele, and continue to learn as much about the many facets of the industry as possible. After managing a couple shops, I began to consider the possibility of owning my own shop someday and I thought of experiencing as many shops as possible as a way of eventually incorporating the best elements and practices of each either into a shop of my own or into one particularly good management opportunity.

My first flower shop job in Illinois was at Kinsch Village Florist in Palatine, Illinois. They were a busy funeral and wedding florist with one greenhouse that did most of their business by phone. I met Jan Braakman at Kinsch's and we liked one another immediately. Jan was a tall blonde with a withering sense of humor and a husband with a lucrative career. When she started Barrington Bouquet in Barrington, Illinois, several years later it was with the promise that I would be her first employee. She and her short, slight, dark-haired partner, Nancy Allen, made a rousing success of their venture and I was hired around the time of their first anniversary. As shop manager for several years, I

helped Jan and Nancy build Barrington Bouquet into a profitable concern before a move necessitated a job change.

I worked next at Easy Pickin's Flowers in Arlington Heights, Illinois for a mother/daughter team who had a large floor space flower shop but not much business. This combination resulted in time for me and another designer to perfect our silk and dried arrangement skills and collaborate on showroom and window display styles. It was doe-eyed Terri Kellner I worked so well with and since we had age and former academic success in common, we became good friends, working together in three different flower shops over time. Terri introduced me to *Exotica: Pictorial Cyclopedia of Exotic Plants,* the most complete guide to tropical plants ever published, and we often pored over it shoulder to shoulder. On our own time, we also began attending wholesale flower design shows in Chicago and the suburbs on weekends to learn about new flowers being sold in wholesale quantity and new design techniques. It was an exciting time to be in the flower business, particularly near a regional transportation hub like Chicago. Packaging methods had developed and transportation times compressed enough to make international shipping of cut floriculture goods a viable reality. The wholesalers were receiving exotic products like parrot tulips from Holland, super-sized roses from South America, birds of paradise from Hawaii, epiphytic orchids from Southeast Asia, and protea from Australia, even as California and Florida growers were diversifying as quickly as possible to remain competitive. We soaked it all up and eventually, Terri approached me with a proposition.

"Why don't we buy one study kit together for the FTD certification and take the tests?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, dragging my feet.

‘C’mon, you know we’d probably knock their socks off downtown,” Terri said giving me a winning smile.

I didn’t relent immediately, but eventually she wore me down. We studied and took the daylong battery of tests to qualify as FTD Master Floral Designers offered at Chicago Floral Design, the best school in the city. We were both students at heart and did very well, earning our certificates with scores at the top of our test group. But we made the owners of Easy Pickin’s nervous. They assumed that we’d expect pay raises they couldn’t afford as acknowledgement of our accomplishments. Eventually, they sold the business to a woman who had a silent partner, but who was unable, as the previous owners had been, to build the volume of business. I was laid off during a particularly slow period, but I’d made numerous contacts within the trade and had even brought a friend into the business.

Lindsay Kwaterski was my softball coach’s girlfriend and a former Playboy Bunny who has the same birthday as me. At my request, she’d helped us during peak floral holiday periods and then opened a shop of her own, Evergreen Florist, on a busy traffic corner in Lake Zurich, Illinois. When I left Easy Pickin’s, I called Lindsay about employment. She was able to give me some part time hours. To supplement my income, I applied and was hired at The Barn of Barrington, an exclusive restaurant and multiple-room catering complex that employed upwards of seventy-five people. It was my intention to stay at The Barn just long enough to pay off some bills, get a little ahead financially, and find a full time flower shop job, but I continued to work there until the week before I moved back to Michigan, eight years later. During part of that time, while I worked very lucrative Sunday brunch shifts more and more often at The Barn, I also

worked full time at Bill's Grove Florist on the northern edge of Arlington Heights, Illinois. At Bill's the work was fairly evenly split between party, wedding, funeral, and hospital work. Bill also belonged to a floral pool that met in Chicago, so our designs went into homes and businesses all over the metropolitan area rather than transferring our customers' orders through the wire service systems. I worked at Bill's until I left Illinois.

I'd been renting a unit in a condominium complex in Palatine, Illinois, for five years when the owner decided to sell the unit and the buyer planned to live in his purchase. Suddenly, it seemed like the right time to move back to Marquette. I'd always known that I go back to the town of my youth where my family still lived. Within a month, I'd returned U-Haul jam-packed to the cool summer nights among close-set trees in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

One of the first things I accomplished was a discussion with my parents and sister about returning to Northern Michigan University. I'd left Northern years before after only a single semester, and as much as I'd been drawn to the color, fragrance, and aesthetics of the flower business, working as a florist for over twenty years was beginning to wear thin. Each of the floral holidays – Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, Boss's Day, Sweetest Day, the long Christmas season – seemed more grueling and less fun as the years went by. Flower shop owners always seemed to be stretched to meet all their financial commitments, which more often than not meant that pay raises were slow in coming and benefits, like medical insurance, were either out of the question or could only be offered on an employer/employee, split pay basis. Bill Dinick, the owner of Bill's Grove Florist, never let a holiday pass without saying, "This is my last Valentine's Day"

or “This is my last Mother’s Day.” It was a standing joke but, over time, it became fodder for reconsideration of my dreams. I knew now that I’d never own a flower shop. But, if not that occupation, then what? I felt ready for a new challenge. I returned to Marquette in July of 1996 and the following month began attending classes at NMU. While I went to school and looked forward to a future change in employment yet to be determined, I still had to support myself. Naturally, I turned to the flower shops in Marquette once again.

While I’d been in Illinois, Char Keller and April Beauchamp, both of whom I’d worked with at Forsberg’s twenty years earlier, had opened Avant Gardens Floral on Presque Isle Avenue, just a couple blocks off Northern’s campus. ‘The girls,’ as friends and employees called them, hired me for part time work and I began taking classes, one at a time at first, and then more as time went by. I landed a second job on campus working for the Gateway Academic Program (GAP), a grant supported project through which students of color are mentored for a richer college experience and for minority undergraduate retention. Through GAP, I began building a community for myself and spending more time on campus. Several years passed before I was told about an advertisement in *The Mining Journal* for a flower shop manager, a job that I interviewed for and won. For the next four years, I managed Wickert Floral in the Westwood Mall and took only night classes. The shop closed at the end of its five-year lease and I returned to Avant Gardens, which the girls had sold in the meantime to a new owner. I worked at Avant and continued to take classes until an unexpected opportunity came along that changed my working life.

In December of 2004, I was offered an adjunct faculty position working for the Center for Native American Studies (CNAS) teaching a class called NAS 204: The Native American Experience. By that time I had completed a bachelor's degree majoring in English with a Native Studies minor and a master's degree in English literature. Suffering from separation anxiety, I was still taking classes with the intention of adding a pedagogy track to my master's degree. The Winter 2005 semester offerings of NAS 204 were all full at forty students each and CNAS was receiving phone calls from students requesting that they be added into one or another of the NAS 204 sections. I approached the Interim Director of CNAS, April Lindala, with a question.

"I just talked to another student who wants to add my 204," I said. "Could we add another section? I think we might fill it, if the number of requests to add the class is any indication."

"I could talk to Don Rybacki about another section. Would you be willing to teach it?'

"Sure," I answered without hesitation.

The section was approved and it filled within five days. I began teaching two sections of NAS 204 that semester and have done so each regular semester since until the Winter of 2007 semester, when things changed.

I wrote course curriculum for a new class some months ago that was approved by the Native Studies Faculty Affairs Committee and scheduled for Winter 2007. The class offering filled to maximum capacity and I signed add cards for NAS 295: Special Topics – History of Indian Boarding School Education. Then, over Christmas break, I learned that Don Chosa, another CNAS adjunct faculty staff member, had left Northern and the

state of Michigan for an opportunity in Minnesota. Several of his NAS 204 sections were split and team taught by the remaining staff. Aimee Cree Dunn and I split a class and each taught another section of NAS 204. I also taught one section of NAS 295 for a total of ten credit hours, the maximum that this institution allows adjunct faculty to teach in a single semester. I also attended a creative nonfiction workshop, since I'd refocused my post master's degree classes into the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Program in Creative Writing and a terminal degree. That semester was a challenge, but that was what I was looking for. I'd definitely found it.

In the classes I teach, I tell my students that one of the negative stereotypes Native Americans continue to live is the myth of the lazy Indian. Mainstream Anglo Americans judged indigenous tribal peoples to be indolent for a number of reasons, among them was a different mindset held by first peoples about land usage and an alternative aboriginal work ethic whose history spoke of working to live rather than living to work. Since indigenous tribal peoples lost their traditional homelands, were forced onto reservations, and became wards of the federal government, many of those who remain reservation based receive annuity payments that are often judged to be no longer deserved by mainstream Americans who tend to view the situation overly simply. They don't inform themselves about inherited oppression or colonial despair which results from the systematic displacement of Native peoples from land bases that were both their economic source of livelihood as well as their spiritual foundation. This wrenching loss continues to manifest as joblessness, poverty, poor health, cultural malaise, family disintegration often in the form of spouse and child abuse, alcoholism, suicide and other collective indicators

of failure to thrive among Indian people. Instead, some dominant-culture Americans gripe about Indians not working when there is often no employment on reservations. They pronounce Indians lazy, a judgment that has spilled beyond reservations to encompass Indians generally.

American Indians whose life stories my students read in *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* often feel compelled to refute the lazy Indian stereotype by explaining how hard working their family members have always been. Evelina Zuni Lucero states in the first sentence of her essay "On the Tip of My Tongue," "For generations, Pueblo people have lived as farmers, moving with the rhythms of the seasons, in love with the soil, with hard work and tenacity, with the fruit of that hard work." Later, she goes on to state, "My parents knew no other way to live except to work hard." I am able to state these same words. I am a Sicangu Lakota matrilineally, also known as Rosebud Sioux, and working hard has always been my family's experience, as it has been my own.

For many years I've worked two jobs. I have friends and know of former classmates who have or are about to retire, while retirement is a remote objective for me. After completion of my MFA, I hope eventually to continue on this teaching path in an enhanced capacity. Whether that will happen here or elsewhere, I've yet to determine. My parents are both edging toward ninety years of age and I'm here with them in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan as long as they live. Whenever I'm asked how I like teaching Native Studies, I say it's what I should have been doing all my life. But, I find I am still drawn to the flower business. Recently, I wondered what day of the week

Valentine's Day will fall on this year. It occurred to me, as it does around each Mother's Day and the busier floral holidays, that I might be able to work at Forsberg's that day – the days of the year when nearly every florist would be thrilled to have an extra pair of knowledgeable hands, no matter what they cost. I have worked there the last couple of Mother's Days for a day or two. It somehow seems fitting that I am back where I began my floral career so many years ago, even if only for a few days each year.

The Indian people I work with on Northern Michigan University's campus are a dedicated lot. I've found them tireless in their determination to offer students the very best educational experience possible both inside and outside the classroom. We know the statistics. Fewer American Indian students that begin college earn a degree than any other ethnic group in the United States. The ones we are lucky enough to acquire at Northern need and deserve everything that we can possibly do to aid them in garnering a diploma. So we mentor, attend Native American Student Association meetings, help organize the annual powwow and Indigenous Food Taster, fill Native American Heritage Month with an array of activities, organize potluck feast dinners, support, help write, and edit *Anishinaabe News* (the Native American campus newspaper) and much more, along with our teaching duties to build community, keep our Native students in school, and attract more. It's work that is deeply rewarding. That gratification keeps us planning and striving, always looking forward, even as we remember our indigenous past and carry on our work each day.

Part Four

Indian Boarding School
A Case Study & A Short Story

Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences that precede and follow them.

Flannery O'Connor

Watching Rain: Indian Boarding School Case Study

As the daughter and granddaughter of boarding school survivors and as a college instructor of a course titled History of Indian Boarding School Education, my research often centers on aspects of the experience and legacy of this example of American education.

The story "Watching Rain" sprang from this focal interest area and a particular incident my mother experienced while she was a student at Haskell Indian Industrial School in Lawrence, Kansas. Wilma Verna Giroux was nine years-old at the time. A small group of schoolmates resisted the smothering rules that governed behavior at the school, slipped out after dark, and ran across the schoolyard under the cover of darkness. One of these, a young boy, aged about eight years, fell into a hole that had been dug in the yard that day. My ninety year-old mother recalls no other details of the accident now other than the fact that all the students marched to breakfast past the dead body of the regulation breaker. The image of that dead child's body remains cemented in mother's memory. In its unforgotten, reiterating reflection of an authentic tragedy, "Watching Rain" is reality fictionalized rather than fictional reality. That reality happened and the viewers of the aftermath still relate fragments of the story.

As a critical instance case study, "Watching Rain" examines one circumstance of boarding school death from a cause other than disease by re-portraying a narrative that rises from a particular real incident. This method particularly suits answering cause-and-

effect questions about a major instance of concern within the boarding school system, namely the observance of established practice of convention. Rain in Willows death is caused in part by a regimented system that forced children into strictly controlled lifestyles with few safety precautions considered in the event of resistance. It was a universal a North American assertion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Indian boarding schools were the last hope to assimilate savage aboriginals. The schools accomplished their mission by incorporating regimented discipline into years of proscriptive education.

Resistance to military-style regimentation in every aspect of daily life at the schools has been well documented. Students challenged and defied the imposed status quo in hundreds of small, innocuous ways without necessarily intending to draw attention to their constant opposition. They moved slower than was required, marched out of step, appeared wearing clothing somehow outside the standard, to name only a few of many resistance choices. Other choices epitomized impulsive bursts of surging, youthful exuberance strained beyond containment. This was probably the situation that led to the death of the child that my mother holds in memory. It is likely that these rule breakers were playing in the dark rather than planning an escape.

The character Rain experiences the same fate as the young boy that my mother remembers, yet the circumstances that bring her to the hole in the yard are much different. Though both the actual child and the fictional one are defiant, Rain's premeditated level of focused resistance and the act that puts her in the darkened schoolyard is much more meaningfully backgrounded and crucially historic to two characters who live on in her tale. The anticipated outcomes of both acts of resistance are

very different than the children's actual experiences. The boy hoped to run wild and free across the school grounds and then return to his bed undetected, while Rain, if successful, would never be seen or heard from again by anyone at the school with the possible exception of the story's narrator.

Neither child achieved his nor her desired objective, and certainly in both cases school officials used them as examples of the ultimate fate of dissenters. According to school employees, the cause of their fates was their rebellious nonconformity and, in a larger context, that rebellion against the system resulted in the ultimate effect of their deaths. Surely in both cases, these would have been powerful lessons thrust on would-be rebels. The presentation of a worst outcome destiny suffered by a dissenter was considered to be highly effective negative reinforcement of the schools' regimented behavior. The younger and more impressionable the child, the more she would be inclined to take the lesson to heart. That harsh and often untrue message, the one heard and seen by my mother and by countless other boarding school students, went like this:

If you follow the rules, you'll be safe. If you break the rules, your fate could resemble what you see here – death. That dead child could be you if you violate policy; if you defy the orderly routine of the school, the very worst you can imagine could (will) happen.

The schools argued in cases like Rain's that the cause of students' deaths was lack of discipline and so it followed that the effect of aggressive resistance, particularly of running away, would often be death. This argument was used as a controlling deterrent. Each time a runaway died, administrators pointed to that child's failure to live within the boundaries of the system's practiced convention.

Yet still, they ran. Many more than ever graduated from Carlisle chose flight. Some, like Carlisle athletic legend Jim Thorpe, made that same choice repeatedly. Particularly in the earlier, harsher days of the system, not even the threat of death deflected their unswerving need to escape.

The reference to the hole in "Watching Rain" being the beginnings of work on a bandstand in the center of the schoolyard is not accidental, nor is that structure meant to be innocuous. According to Amelia Katanski, the boarding school bandstand with its panoptical, surveillancing presence called the Man-on-the-Band-stand in Carlisle Indian Industrial School newspapers was a metaphor for the voice of authority of Carlisle's educators and administrators (55). That malevolent presence claims its first victim before it even exists in "Watching Rain."

The deaths of many runaways who encountered a variety of lethal circumstances have also been documented, along with the consequences of more passive forms of non-cooperation. However, the actual number of those who suffered the ultimate punishment will never be known. Some simply disappeared.

"Watching Rain" is dedicated to the over two hundred occupants of graves whose headstones score the Earth at Carlisle (now the US Army's War College) and to thousands of others who perished in one way or another while students within the national system of dozens of scantily funded, disease-ridden, and achingly lonely off-reservation boarding schools.

We, your ancestors, remember you. We attempt to comprehend your lives. Some of us continue to live with intergenerational posttraumatic stress in the ongoing fallout within families resulting from boarding school experiences. You are elemental to whom we are. We sense and make sense of ourselves through you. And some of us continue to tell and write your stories. We reach out to you, touch you over generations.

We will never forget you. You are us.

Watching Rain

She said more than once she hadn't run fast enough, hadn't jumped as far as she should have.

A student and I stood on the main staircase landing with our backs to the school watching the Episcopalian priest's approach in the searing September sun. Superintendent McMasters slid past me, maneuvered his considerable girth down the cement staircase, and shuffled toward the small wagon to speak to Father Wein. Father, in turn, spoke to a small boy sitting next to him and then lashed the reins across the backside of a chestnut Morgan harnessed to the wagon. The horse surged into wavering bands of heat billowing above the prairie. A tall, thin girl in a deerskin dress stood alone, parfleche bag in hand.

The girl bolted after the springboard wagon through billowing white dust. With each step she leapt faster, extending a single hand that strained for the wooden cart she'd

just stepped down from, as her churning legs propelled her over the bumpy road. I moved toward the gate, fascinated by her speed and that of the wagon quickening away. Through a clearing in the dust, I saw her reach out, feather-touch worn wood, as the good Father glanced back, met the girl's gaze, and turned to lay his whip to the horse. The bouncing wagon lurched beyond her grasp and then further away. Stumbling, her pace slowed.

Heeding a command from Mr. McMasters, the pupil slouching near us now at the school's arched-iron gate sped away toward the girl. Meanwhile, the youth in the wagon repeated one word until distance stole his voice. "Raaaaiiiinnnn, Raaaaiiiinnnn." When the boy directed by Mr. McMaster's tackled the girl, her legs shot skyward. She slammed the pale earth head first.

Her eyes fluttered once and then opened wide to observe me cradling her. "I bleve I know how ya feel, girl. I know how ya feel," I said in the speech particular to my folks, a native tongue that more education would sweep away. I'd been rocking her there in the middle of the road for dragging minutes, hoping she'd wake up, long after Mr. McMasters plodded through oak doors into the ruddy stone school.

My name is Esther Mae Johnson; most everyone calls me Miss Essie nowadays. My folks were slaves in the South seventy years ago and more. I was told by friends and family whose opinions I treasured that I was a looker when I was young, and I turned that to my advantage by answering everyone who asked me what I wanted in the same way: schooling. An education, I reasoned early on, was escape into a safe life that many women around me didn't have. I wanted to teach others that a life of learning fashioned

protection. Finding a posting where I could accomplish that was tiresome. The Indian boarding schools were among very few places where a Negro woman could teach, so that's where I went.

I had a terrible spell with a white handyman at the first school where I worked in North Dakota and moved on to Chambers Indian School near the eastern border of South Dakota, thinking I was lucky. Before I left, with the help of an endless flow of students, I ran the wash house in North Dakota, or what the white folks who never came near it called the laundry. At Chambers, I was hired as a dormitory matron and I also taught the girls tatting, a handwork skill that I learned from Catholic nuns. "Tatting can earn a clever girl a living," I told the Indian girls. Some of them did beautiful work, having come as they did from women who decorated clothing and bags with quills and beads. Not one of them ever learned faster or knotted more beautiful lace with the shuttles than Rain in Willows.

That first day, as I cradled her after she was knocked senseless, I looked down at a clear brown face, thick, black hair braided and tied with velvety leather bands, and a slim body that caused me to judge Rain younger than her eleven years. When her eyes finally opened, I sensed confident intelligence, an able person. Lying very still, she studied me, listening.

"How do ya feel? You got a knot on yer head the size a' my fist. It'll hurt awhile. Will ya tell me yer name? My name is Esther Johnson. The students call me Miss Essie." I smiled into coffee bean eyes that sized me up. When she finally spoke, her first words were, "*Mahpeyah Luta.*"

"Do you speak English? You can't talk Indian here. My name is Miss Essie," I said, pointing at my chest. Then stabbing an index finger at her I said too loud, "What is your name?"

"C*hazhay,*" she said, barely audible, in a lilting voice I wanted to hear.

"Your name is Chazzie?" I said, my surprise making her smile for the first time.

"*Chazhay* is name," she said in practiced English. "My name is *Mahgahzu mahe Wahpohpah.* In English – Rain in Willows. I am called *Mahgahzu* – Rain."

"Pleased to make yer acquaintance. Yer English is better 'n passable good. Better 'n mine. You musta been schooled by church folks near yer people. That should help ya out here. We get some that don't speak English at all. The school will give ya a Christian name if you don't have one. Do ya? Have a Christian name, that is?"

Rain twisted neatly and, in a single fluid motion, stood only to stagger, lightheaded, as she'd gained her feet. I rose, stepped close, and pulled the lanky girl against my left side, hoping she'd allow my support. As we ambled toward the school, I brushed my dusty dress with my right hand out of habit. The pervasive powder was never as unchecked as it was in the dryness of summer's end at the eastern edge of the Great Plains. Everything was covered with a pale patina, a layer that sifted into shut cupboards and closed drawers. Chasing it with a dust cloth seemed like time wasted but we kept at it for godliness' sake. Rain was earth-covered head to toe as she leaned against me but I didn't mind.

"Ya said *Mahpeyah Luta?* What is that?" I asked and felt her tighten against me.

"My brother, his name, Red Sky. Why was he taken away? Where will he go? Who will take care of him?" Rain's gaze probed, worried, willing an answer. Mahogany eyes dominated her gaunt, dusky face.

"I dunno know but I'll see what I can find out," I said, wondering if we'd ever know.

Rain came to Chambers in 1892 from the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota. As trust grew between us, she told me pieces of her story. Her mother died of a coughing sickness when Rain was about five years old, and her father remarried. Her stepmother had many children and Rain and Red Sky were two among many. An Episcopalian minister on Rosebud visited families and convinced many to send their children to a new day school on the reservation. Rain's father rode his paint gelding to school beside her mustang pony for a few days until she could make the ride alone. She proved to be a quick study, a clever student. When government agents began picking up Indian children for the federal off-reservation boarding schools five years later, she and Red Sky were reluctantly handed over.

Inside Chambers girls' dormitory, Rain met Miss Kurs, the Head Matron. She'd worked at the school since it had opened eleven years earlier, and she considered herself more the first lady of Chambers than any superintendent's wife, since several had come and gone in that time. Like a curved blade, she bent at the waist from a bone ailment in her back.

Student seamstresses altered her lead grey, severe dresses so that the skirt fronts were shorter to account for her stoop. Miss Kurs stood centered on the glistening maple floor of the dormitory vestibule.

"Follow me, girl," she said to Rain, managing again to make student contact feel like a nuisance.

Rain cocked her head, searched my eyes. I nodded with a sigh meant only for Rain but Miss Kurs heard it. "I'll speak to you in my office in one hour," she spat at me. "Yes, ma'am," I said, dreading the meeting already. Since Rain had attended an Episcopal day school and had a priest as her teacher, the Chambers program was less difficult for her than it was for first time students. She never spoke of that first meeting with Miss Kurs but when I saw her that evening in the dining room she wore a red handprint like battle-ready paint across her cheek. The dress her stepmother had sewn and quilled was gone, as were her careful braids, replaced by a sagging school uniform and shorn hair pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She bore the unmistakable reek of lye soap and insecticide powder. Still, her straight back, held-high chin, and curious eyes set her apart. She looked taller, even stronger than she had.

"Rachel," Rain said, as she stood near her narrow, swaying bed later that night.

"What?" I said, turning from a younger girl's bed.

"The name the Christians gave me – Rachel," she said, her straight figure outlined by a barred window. A moment later, an earnest question. "Will you call me Rain?"

I stepped near, lowered my voice. “I cain’t when anyone can hear us. But when we’re alone, ya’ll be Rain, always.” That smile again.

“When will I hear about Red Sky?” she asked, twisting the corner of a threadbare sheet. I wondered if she thought of him as he must be now, dressed in citizen’s clothing, sitting with a book in hand, learning white folk’s stories. Or did she recall him flowing across the churning prairie astride his first mustang, an easy addition to the horse, the land, and his people?

“I dunno. It’ll take time. Can ya be patient?” I answered.

“For awhile,” she said.

Rain studied English, reading, history, writing, and arithmetic with 483 other Indian boys and girls for half the day. The remainder, she worked at an assigned trade that was unpaid, exhausting, and monotonous. Student labor kept the school running. Perhaps because Miss Kurs had discovered a reason to slap Rain, she assigned her to a cleaning detail. With other students fallen from favor, Rain scoured toilets and mopped and waxed floors throughout the school five afternoons every week. Her knees and hands developed an angry redness from crawling through harsh cleaning solutions, scrub brush in hand, until I gave her a lotion remedy that my papa had smeared on the udders of cows. I’d found it eased my skin when I’d been doing the same work at Catholic school years earlier.

“How are yer knees?” I asked, looking at her chapped but improving hands.

“Better, *Pilamaya ye.*”

"Thank you, right?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. She smiled even less now than when she'd arrived. Not knowing about Red Sky grieved her. Even though speaking Indian was strictly forbidden, we'd fallen into a pattern of her teaching me simple words and phrases in her Lakota language. My use and strange, Southern pronunciation of her first tongue pleased her and I wanted to give her a bit of happiness. I accented her language with my down home, slangy inflection to encourage her rare smile.

She hadn't made friends, though the girls told me she was kind and helpful. When she wasn't in class or cleaning, I'd find her in the small room where the staff accumulated books and atlases. She carefully unfurled and gazed steadily at maps. One day I pointed out all the Indian reservations in South Dakota. Her intense eyes registered the expanses portrayed on paper, while her work-roughened fingers traced distances.

"I have news about your brother," I said to her on a grasshopper-fresh day in late May. Her face brightened but wariness resurfaced in her eyes. Near the crest of a steep hill, we sat in knee-high grass pooling in the wind, warm on a Saturday afternoon. Rain examined my face with polished endurance. I'd asked her eight months ago if she could be patient; she'd resisted every natural tendency to question me since, though I was sure she thought of her much-loved brother every day.

"Father Wein knows a husband and wife who wanted a child, a boy. They were generous to his church and concerned about Indian people. Father Wein believes that Red Sky will be well cared for and educated," I said, pausing to check Rain's reaction.

“Where is he?” she asked, controlling her face.

“Mr. and Mrs. Steele took him to a big town. Mr. McMasters' files say that they told Father Wein they’d be living in Minneapolis. Do you remember where that is?”

“Across Minnesota.”

“Yes, a distance,” I said, staring toward the horizon.

Not long ago, millions of buffalo ranged across these plains, the center of Rain’s people’s physical and spiritual life. Now they were all gone, slaughtered to control the Indians. Viewed as a burden and an obligation on the federal government, it was finally decided that complete assimilation was the only way for Indians to survive. So now, families were losing their children to distant Indian schools. Negro families had been split up and lost to one another during slavery for decades. Some Indian families had lived a similar fate and now most were losing their children to boarding schools.

Turning to gaze at Rain perched in the lilting, chartreuse grass, my cheeks tightened, itched under salty tears, as the ceaseless wind pushed earthen scents eastward. Rain’s face tilted skyward. One hand bounced a stick that she’d brought to forage for *tepseelah*, the wild turnips that her people loved, and the other kneaded the quickening growth of indiangrass, bluestem, and prairie dock at her side. She gripped last year’s crisp, hardened ruins, along with tender new shoots, holding on, letting go, grasping, releasing. Though she was rooted here, *tate*, the wind, seemed to have lifted her away. The current that lashed ebony tendrils of hair across her clear features wheeled downhill to coil around the imposing stone building below.

Runaways were always a problem at the Indian schools – some more than others. Chambers had its share. Most were forcibly returned to face a variety of punishments depending on the current superintendent. Some were more brutally imaginative than others. I was glad at the time that Mr. McMasters only isolated runaways in solitary confinement, though I didn't like the idea of feeding them only thin soup, bread, and water for days on end. It wasn't until years later that I learned how harmful this type of detention is for children. A few runaways were never heard of again. And like the other schools, more than one incident ended in tragedy. The year before Rain arrived, two boys ran west into the driving path of a killing spring snowstorm tearing across the Plains. Days later, they were found draped in each other's arms and legs at the edge of a farmer's corn-stubble field.

Piecing it together over time, I believe I finally know how Rain left us.

The dormitory was probably as quiet as it ever gets. Perhaps Rain heard a cough from the bed near the wall and she would have thought again that young Mary's consumption was worsening. Rain would miss her but Red Sky needed his sister. She must find him as their mother would expect of her. It's likely she lifted herself slowly out of the bed with its groaning springs. A low moan may have frozen her in place for sluggish seconds until she was sure that it came from a dreaming sleeper. Eventually, she pulled on her work dress, bent for a roll of necessities containing a map of Minnesota hidden under her mattress, and then stepped away barefoot toward the door.

I've imagined it all time and again for years. When one of the opening door's hinges commenced a metallic screech, Rain scolded herself for not greasing them well enough. Hugging shadows, she inched through the cavernous sleeping quarters, down the wooden staircase that she'd tested for creaks each time she'd mopped, across the vestibule, and over the threshold of the double entry doors.

When she finally inhaled night breeze, Rain was grateful she hadn't been noticed. She turned her face in the direction of the moon but the sky was filled with clouds, the heavens hidden. She thanked the Creator for concealing her so far. In murky gloom her heart soared as she thought how soon she'd see Red Sky. She edged off the dormitory staircase, creeping along the building's weathered wall. She turned east and palmed her way along the building again to the corner where she knew she'd have to leave its protection to run across open schoolyard. But as she gazed out into midnight, she realized that this side of the grounds was a blanket of darkest shadow.

She pressed her back against the rough brick and strained her eyes and ears into the night listening for movement, anything that might result in discovery. Only the secret comfort of darkness stretched out before her. She smelled dampness; a sense of wet mud came to her but she dismissed it. The sky had given no moisture. It had been weeks since it rained. The yard was flat, covered with prairie grass. Older boys cut the growth with graceful swinging motions of scythes. She recalled the sweep of the long, arched blade bounced by sunlight. Pushing off the building, her worn shift lifted behind her, the rough stone grabbing fabric, clutching. She sprinted through open blackness. The toughened soles of her feet flattened stiff stubble leap after leap. She gained speed. *Inyonkah,* she would have been thinking, *inyonkah*, run, run to *Mahpeyah*. She smiled into night air.

Cool breeze flowed over dark skin. Legs and arms singing the song of runners, she gathered speed across the exposed yard. It may have come into her mind to slow down about the time that the ground was no longer beneath her. Then, she was falling.

Rain pitched forward into the hole that had been dug that afternoon. Mr. McMasters and the staff had been surprised when the hole had begun to fill with water around fist-sized stones at about seven feet. The covered, wooden bandstand patterned after the one at Canyon Gap School would have its own well and water pump, just as they'd hoped. Rain's angle of fall slammed her skull against a protruding stone, knocking her unconscious. Her head lolled downward, her nose and mouth listed just below the opaque, whitish grey water level. She breathed liquid.

The following morning, though I told Mr. McMasters that the children should not see such a thing, he instructed me to march all the students past the gaping hole. Beside it, Rain's body lay with arms crossed over her chest in an attitude of Christian repose. I knew that a few of the children would live many years. Most, no matter how long their lives, would never forget the sight of Rain lying in her mud-encrusted shift atop a pile of water-flattened dirt near that hole in the earth. I see her lying there as if it were yesterday and know I did the only possible thing.

I refused Mr. McMaster's order and lost my job at the school. I sat on Rain's bed, looking down on Miss Kurs performing the task that I'd refused. When I left Chambers, I traveled to Minneapolis, intent on finding Red Sky. It took me nearly two months to locate the Steeles who had lived first in Minneapolis and then later in St. Paul. I watched Red Sky in a park near the house where he lived and elsewhere over the years. What could I have said to him had we spoken? I glimpsed Rain in his face and eyes, in a

melancholy that came over him when he suddenly stopped, stood motionless, seeing only within. I understood his loss and for some time found reprieve from my own only in teaching.

I settled in the Twin Cities, worked in advancing capacities in a school for Negro children, and attended night classes that earned me a college degree after many years. Eventually, I met my Harry and we had a family of our own. They eased my constant sorrow but couldn't help me forget. I told my own children after they'd grown into adulthood about my sadness over that last vision of Rain. Never having seen such a thing, they struggled to understand. Nor do they appreciate my attachment to a particular tatted lace doily that I always keep on the table next to my chair. They put it down to the oddities of an old woman. More than a half century later, Rain in Willows still comes to mind. I think of her more often than anyone knows. Certain nights when I hear rainfall, I rise to watch it pepper trees in the yard beyond my window, to slide down slender, scimitar leaves of willows.

Works Cited

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