

## Just a Memory

Anne Carrière-Acco

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When certain people sigh, you know they are memory-laden. With an acknowledgement that you heard them, they will say what memory stalks them.

I, for one, have two distinct memories.

A large group of cousins, siblings, and aunties all dressed in our berry-picking get-ups of old battered wide-brimmed hats, long-sleeved workmen's shirts, tattered jeans, and old shoes walked the two kilometres to the vast raspberry bushes. We carried lard pails, canvas bags full of bannock sandwiches, and mason jars of black tea with Carnation milk. We meant business. The locale was very near the Saskatchewan River on the Pemmican Portage side of the island.

The raspberry is an essential food for roaming mother bears and their little bears. Never mind the cuteness, a bear takes care of business no matter whom or what shows up. We stayed within hollering and yelling distance from the nearest occupied houses. We were at it all day till every morsel of food was gone and tea and water containers were empty. Our buckets were full and brimming with sweet smelling raspberries.

We headed back in the late afternoon. We were a tattered-looking rabble by the time we rounded the last bend into the village proper. By the cemetery, we were down to laughing and cawing at silly jokes like crows jostling one another for found and savaged garbage. At a certain house just off Main Street came a loud and clear voice, "You look like a bunch of comminak!" someone said, she called us "communists." I heard comminak. At home, I offloaded my buckets of raspberries and asked Mother about this new word—to me—that I thought I heard.

There was no direct answer. Mother was reaching into her memory bank. Therein was an answer of my choice.

The first time I laid eyes on her, she came down the gangplank of the paddle-wheeler coming from a far away Southern city. She looked like a well-heeled tourist or an okimah-eskqew. Her sleek and silky brown hair was coiffed in a perfect 1920s bob. On her wide shoulders was a mink cape. Her dress followed the length of her long and slim torso beyond her waist and flared out at the hips elegantly. The length of the dress showed off a great pair of long legs. Her handsome face was made up with a rosy-tinted rouge and bright-coloured lipstick. She carried a leather handbag. All of this was in such contrast to our Mother Hubbard dresses and pinafores. Our mothers wore Edwardian-length dark dresses and Hudson's Bay black shawls. Their black hair was groomed in perfect long braids down to their waist. She posed for a few seconds on the top of the gangplank in her high-heeled shoes looking down at the oozing muddy shoreline. At that point, my brother looking nattily outfitted in white ducks and white sailor's uniform appeared. He took her arm like he was familiar with this apparition.

We all turned together like a flock of geese doing a u-turn. The most fleet-footed and not too breathless gave a full report of brother's homecoming and expansive details on his companion. Mother fainted. We were astonished again within ten minutes. Mother composed herself long enough and well enough to give brother a proper mother's welcome. Our gawking just continued as introductions were made in the proper Cree fashion. The guest spoke an English accented Cree. We were shooed out of the house. The committed eavesdroppers gave an account of the purpose of this surprise visit. She came here to marry our brother. Negotiations went on half the night, the rest of the night Mother prayed out loud and quite frantically. I went to sleep despite the mental wrestling and I think I heard the gnashing of teeth. The year was 1925.

By the time the snow came, Mother had died from pneumonia leaving Father terribly grieved and the ten of us orphaned. Even in 1925, when the world looked rosy through those wishful glasses, the rumblings of the catastrophes of 1929 were being heard by the more astute of world watchers. Being children we had just enjoyed ourselves. When our family life changed forever, we were astounded as to the profoundness and finality of the loss of our mother and the start of the Great

Depression. Even the potato seeds went rotten before giving us a single plant resembling a potato seedling. Dad packed us into his big fishing boat and we moved into the Northern bush to fish and look for food. He gave our comfortable big log house to our oldest married sister. We set up camp on the Sturgeon Weir. Dad remained a good provider.

In the mid 1930s, I had a chance to visit my brother at his campsite. He was with his small family by now. His job had evaporated with the great drought where the Saskatchewan River has two sources from the east-side of the Rockies in Alberta. Even with the massive dredging of silt, dryness became a rigid fact of our lives. The bare iron pipes and the rotting skeleton of the old North Cote beached by the Big Stone River reminded us of the devastation. Brother had been given draft horses and sleighs from Dad. He scabbled a living hauling anything he could.

There she was at the camp. She wore an old faded dress held together by a piece of rope. She had learned how to use those hands at camp, scraping hides, making meals on a tin stove, and washing clothes in a tin tub. She was, mentally and physically, very tough when other people had become unhinged. Once the veneer was stripped down she remained when others had fled.

But among us she always retained an elegant pose because she could. Mother made jams and jellies from all that raspberry picking. I had no trouble delivering two jars of home-made jam from my common hand and labour.

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