Limon Joseph

By Helen Olson

It must have been on a weekend, a Sunday probably, because her Dad wasn't at work at the pulp mill, or even out in their one field, or cutting fire wood, but instead was puttering around the garage with the big door opened and the sunlight streamed in,. And she was with him, probably talking a mile a minute because she always did, when suddenly there they were--a boy about fourteen and girl about twelve, though age is hard to judge in ones so different. Looking at their expressionless russet-colored faces and their thick bodies, his in baggy overalls and a work shirt, hers in a cotton house dress will below her knees, she felt suddenly shivery and aware of her blond pigtails, her too-pale skin (people were always advising her mother about what to do to "put some color in that girl's cheeks") and her skinny arms and legs sticking out of her halter and shorts. She felt even scrawnier and more tenuously attached to the earth than she usually did around the Catholic kids at school.

Her Dad didn't even seem surprised. He just stood up from whatever it was he had been doing on the newspapers spread on the garage floor and waited.

> "Flat tire. Got any patching?"
> She can't even remember who said it, though probably it was the boy.
> "Nope. Com'mon. I'll take it to town."

Then before she could even ask could she go along (which she always did), or even think if she wanted to go this time, they were in the car (the girl in the back seat), and her usually talkative, but now quiet, Dad was rapidly rolling down the windows (and somehow she knew it was because the two didn't bathe as often as she was made to), and the car was backing out of the driveway. She stood in the middle of the yard while she watched them go up the road and out of sight--presumably in the direction of the car with the flat tire. Then, just about the time they came back past the house in the direction of town, her Mother came out to explain.

> "Their grandfather, Limon Joseph, worked for Grandpa Alec."

Then they sat down of the porch steps to wait for her dad to come back and her Mother, who shared her love of family stories, told her about Limon Joseph and her Grandparents, and how that was the reason that these two Indian kids were sent past a lot of other houses to get help from her Dad because he was Grandpa Alec' son.

Limon Joseph was a Chippawa Chief. (She remembered years later when she was a know-it-all college student that Limon Joseph, then a very old man, died, and hundreds of Chippawas came from all over the state to the little Methodist Church, the Indian Church having long since fallen into disrepair and said to be used for quite un-Christian-like activities, and she had been amazed to realize that it was true--he really had been a chief.) Grandpa Alec, her Dad's step-father had been, among other things, a lumber man and had timbered land across the lake. He had hired his crews from Limon Joseph. Apparently, Limon, unlike many Indians (at least as they were reputed to be) had loved to talk. He was an intelligent and wise man. Even her Mother could remember the long evenings when Limon Joseph would come over to "shoot the bull."

The Indian women would got to camp with the men and live in small drafty cabins provided by whom?--Grandpa Alec, a lumber company? She didn't even know whose land they timbered--

just that it was on the West side of the lake, directly across from her Grandparents' farm, and that the timber was floated out in the spring.

In any event, it was then that this special family relationship had begun. In the winter, after the lake had frozen, the women and children (she remembered thinking "squaws and papooses" and wondering if that was romantic or insulting, and suspecting it was the latter) would walk across to town for provisions. It was a long way--three miles across the lake, then one more to the Grandmother's house, then two more to town, then back--all in the cold Northern winter. They would stop at her Grandmother's to get warm and to eat, first on the way there, and then on the way back. Once, only once, her Grandmother, who believed it a sin not to offer something to eat to a guest, had been forced to turn them away hungry. They had been the second group through in as many days and there was nothing in the house to offer. Later that winter, one of the women died. She had died of tuberculosis, but her Grandmother had always feared that her one breach of hospitality had in some way contributed, and that she, her Grandmother, would somehow be held responsible when her own "time came."

The trouble had all begun when Limon Joseph had taken to drink, and his sons, and finally his daughters, after him. (Had Grandpa Alec, himself a hard-drinking man, contributed to this, not knowing or perhaps not believing the stories of the danger of liquor to the Indian?) The family and the tribe had disintegrated with only Mrs. Limon Joseph to remain above it all and to come to school a few years later, a small, withered, dignified old lady, to teach the already modern grandchildren of pioneers the dying art of basket weaving.[1] (That was when "homemade" was just beginning to become "handicraft" or "native artistry.")

Now they were down to a few families clustered in dirt-floored shanties where half the babies died in their first year, the men working at odd jobs just enough to keep them all alive, and out for a drive in one of their beat-up old cars loaded down with too many, too heavy women (who earned their own keep from some of the white "locals" in a way she was not to understand for a few years).I And when an over-worn, over-loaded tire had gone flat, they had walked past a lot of other houses to come to her Dad, who would understand and not condescend.

Then, as they sat there, her Dad's car went by again and a few minutes later swung into the driveway and he went back to his puttering. Some time later, when only she was left watching, they went by, the old sagging car with its rear bumper nearly scraping the road, its occupants looking straight ahead.

She wonders sometimes if she had stayed there, if their children would have come to her, and if she would have granted them the same dignity of not asking, not prying--just doing. But staying in small farm communities is dangerous, or so she tells herself, so she didn't. And she won't know.

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[1] I have since learned that one of her baskets is in the Smithsonian.