

Untitled*
By Annette Ferran

There was a time the Indians trooped by the house like migrating animals. They were called "Indians " back then, with no regard for the individual tribes, much less the individual personalities. I called them "Indians" too, and sometimes even "injuns" when I didn't watch myself. And they did trudge by as if they were cattle being herded toward better pastures. They were abnormally dark people, we thought. We thought we were the right color: pale and blond with light-colored eyes. Our parents in Europe had been that color; our children were that color. Our grandchildren came out a little darker sometimes and we didn't like to think why. It may have been the Indians or it may have been the occasional Negro (as we called them) who strayed too far north. We preferred to say it was the Black Irish. They were always in and out of jail, among other places, but they were related by blood and heritage to most of us. As a matter of fact, most of us were related to most of us.

But I was going to tell about the Indians. There were a few who lived in the community. They cut their hair short and wore overalls and shoes most of the time and held down jobs when they could get them, which is more than could be said for the Irish. But most of the ones we saw were passing by the house. We didn't really know where they were going (I do now, of course) but they were a pitiful-looking lot. They never spoke much and they shuffled in bare feet down the road with the dust settling on their skin and the sun beating down on their black hair. Well, that wasn't quite as pitiful a sight as when they came by in the winter, still barefoot. And winters up there were no frolicking sleigh-ride back then either. Those poor creatures did look so much like animals. I've said it before and I'll say it again. Nothing looked through those black eyes but misery. Not even spiritual misery, as far as I could see (although I wasn't so good at it then as I am now), but just plain physical misery. So I used to let them in and give them something to eat. I was not very popular for it, let me tell you. The other women whispered their predictions of what would happen to me, but I always believed they were jealous. Jealousy is a horrible emotion. It festers away at the inside of the jealous one and does nothing to injure the one envied. I believed they were jealous of my generosity. A little high-nosed of me, I admit, but I was a proud woman. Pride is also not the most admirable of emotions, but it accomplishes more than jealousy does. I'd like to say that I fed those Indians out of altruism, but I don't believe in it. I believe the best generosity comes from pride. I wanted nothing more than to demonstrate hospitality, a hospitality to rival (dare I say it) even the Lord's. That's what motivated me. Regardless, we often had a store of food set aside for a bad year, and so when the silent feet stood in front of my door, I had a pot already going, and bowls and spoons always standing by to ease the way of the sustenance into the weakened lot.

Gratitude was never mine in the way we have been taught to expect it. Never a spoken thanks, never a gift in return. None of those individual faces did I ever see again. But gratitude came this way: larger and larger waves of displaced, hungry people. They told one another by some means that there was a woman in the big stone farmhouse whose fire was always going under the cook-pot. It made me smile to see them standing there, not begging, but expecting.

Then the bad year came. Every seven years it comes, they say. It may be a hot summer or a wet one. It may be bugs or a disease among the animals. Or it may even be new taxes. This particular year it was the winter. It came early and it stayed and stayed with a

* A story based on a family story about Karen Hermanson Olson Ellison

vengeance. I kept the small children home from school for fear of frostbite. The older ones went in the dark and came back in the dark, their mufflers frozen to their faces.

But the Indians kept coming. For a little while afterwards I blamed them for my sorrow. I realize now how silly that was. If we had it bad, imagine how it was with these poor souls. We had food on our table--not a lot, but enough--and a roof over our heads and a fire in the grate. We were wealthy. But not wealthy enough, I thought, to help the less fortunate. It was easy in the good years. It was so easy it made you feel smug. But that bad year made me selfish somehow. My eighth child was on the way, I could blame it on that. My other little ones were pale and thin and listless from lack of sun. The older ones and their father and the farm help were ravenous all the time, just from trying to go on as usual while the weather put them down. And our storeroom wasn't as full as I was used to. I suppose all combined--and I forget that I too was suffering from lack of natural light--I suppose such conditions would try the soul of anyone, even one as prideful as I. Anyway, I turned a group of them away. They stood on the porch in the early dark with a new snowstorm coming on and I told them they could rest and warm awhile but I had no extra food. So they went on. Then I fed my family, who had eaten only that morning. I even ate a little myself.

I don't know how I heard the news, but somehow you always do. As I said, none of those Indians ever come back and yet the next group knew where to stop. The important news, I suppose, travels on the wind, or maybe I would say from spirit to spirit if I wanted to risk the poetry. Anyway, I heard somehow that one of them died. One of the ones I turned away. He died before they arrived wherever they were going. My family tried to convince me that it wasn't my doing, that my one potato never was the sole salvation of any human being, but that made me sadder. I wanted to believe that I was a savior of some sort, although I never said that because that would be blasphemy. So then I started to think that this was God's way of getting at my pride, and I felt so bad that He had sacrificed one of His own people just so I wouldn't feel so high and mighty that I dared to be angry at Him. And then, when the anger was over, I just didn't know what to do.

It would be prettier to say that I died soon after, but I didn't. I lived for years and years. The Indians stopped coming by after awhile. Those that hadn't been herded out stayed and pretended to be like us. Some of their children started coming out with red hair and some of ours with brown skin. Even the Irish got mixed up so well that there are no true ones left. As a matter of fact, there are no true anything left anymore, just people. I suppose it's better that way.

One thing I do notice, though, is my great-grandchildren. They're plump and happy and they think of me sometimes but I don't ever see them open the door to a stranger.