

A Family
Matter

Elizabeth
Cook-Lynn

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

A Family Matter

A vague restlessness woke Anita, and on impulse she got up and opened the bedroom window. It was just before dawn when the light of the moon had faded and shadows fell darkly upon the steep hills and pines and the river lay silent and still.

Today she was going to Fort Hall.

Crouching on her knees, Anita peered into the darkness and felt the presence of the geese just before she heard them. Hurrying, stroking the air powerfully, purposefully, the huge flock hung for a moment above her window and then, individually, they began their lonely awkward cries to each other, calling their names and telling their stories and moving ponderously into the heavy fog which lay in the distance across the hills. Unaccountably, hot tears stung Anita's eyes and her nose. Her cheeks ached. Quickly, she got up and switched on a light in the hall and went to the kitchen to make coffee.

She poured the hot coffee into a thermos and went back to the bedroom and dressed in the semi-darkness. She went over to her husband, motionless in the pretense of sleep, his arms raised to cover his eyes. "I'm going," she said. She sat still on the side of the bed for a few moments, until she realized that he wasn't going to say anything to her and then she put on her coat, took the thermos from the kitchen table and left the house. She drove her car carefully away in the drizzling rain and she knew that Ray was lying there listening to her leave.

An hour later she stopped just outside of St. Maries and parked her red Nova at a rest stop alongside the freeway. It's the first of November, she thought, and she felt chilled as she walked to the roadway bathroom, the sky and the land shrouded in gray light. She searched the sky for the sun, weak and pale beneath the moist clouds, and decided silently, this day's not going to get any better than this.

The toilet was empty except for a short, white-haired woman who smiled and adjusted her belt as Anita walked to the narrow booth. "Too much coffee, I guess," said the white-haired lady pleasantly and they both nodded.

Moments later as they left the bleak quiet bathroom the woman smiling brightly said do you mind if I ask you a question sure said Anita you're Indian aren't you yes well said the woman I've known a lot of good Indians and there's nothin' to be ashamed of we're from Phoenix as if that explained something and we run a grocery and tourist stop and we've had a lot of good Indian boys work for us you don't need to be ashamed of that.

In order not to be rude, Anita strolled with the woman to the curb and feigned a politeness she did not feel.

"Where you headed?" asked White Hair.

"Fort Hall."

"Oh, do you live there?"

"No. I used to be married there. I'm just going there to get my two sons and bring them back with me."

"Oh, how nice! Well," said White Hair, who noticed that her husband had started the car engine, "have a nice trip," and she smiled and waved.

Anita felt small and remote as she pulled onto the freeway, and the whistling wind rising about the faulty car window reminded her of the sound of huge goose wings flapping. White Hair's "how nice" hissed in her ears and she tried to organize her vision about herself as the mother of her two sons and the wife of Ray and the ex-wife of Victor and the daughter-in-law of Rosina and the stepdaughter of John Thunder and . . . and . . . she tried to organize these thoughts about herself around White Hair's recognition though she knew it to be superficial and secular. How nice that I'm going to get my sons . . . after a year's rehab at the treatment center and two years working as a nurse's aide and two years married to Ray. How nice! For five years my sons haven't laid eyes on me and now I'm going to get them. How nice!!

"Rain is expected to continue," the radio announcer proclaimed. "Highs will be around fifty to fifty-four degrees throughout the day and lows are expected to reach twenty-eight degrees. And now, here's George Jones, the best of the country singers and he's fallen on hard times, with 'He Stopped Loving Her Today.'"

Anita thought vaguely about her own decline and weary deterioration and considered that it had been as inevitable, perhaps, as the fading of the dim November sun she now glimpsed over her left shoulder as she drove, the yellow outlines of the great tunkashina impotent and moving away from the Earth, feeble and indistinct.

As the rain glittered and country music filled the air, the red Nova slipped through the hills of Northern Idaho and the hours passed and the woman driving did not stop but once for gas until the headlights fell upon one of the three grocery stores at Fort Hall, Idaho. She bought some cheese, crackers, and milk and went straight to the motel to eat a quick snack and fall into a heavy, soundless sleep.

Toward morning she dreamed of two small boys walking along looking for a bear. While they were walking they heard something coming after them. When they looked around they saw that it was their mother's head. "Where are you going?" asked the head. The children became afraid and ran away and climbed into a tree. Their mother's head followed them and began shaking the tree and just when the tree was about to fall, a voice from the treetop said to the children, "Sit, quickly, in the bird nest," and as they climbed into the bird's nest, the wind bore it off swiftly. The head wept loudly.

Anita woke with a start as the weeping sounds of her dream changed to the murmur of autumn wind moaning in her ears and she lay in the narrow bed,

exhausted and spent. She thought about Ray and wished that he would have consented to come with her.

Leaves swept in bunches covered the sidewalk as she entered the tribal building and asked the secretary to confirm her appointment with Emil White Horn and the tribal family counselors.

When she walked into the court chambers she noticed that her children were not present, only their grandmother, Rosina, and she felt sharply disappointed for a moment. Then she felt her hands go cold as she realized that something was wrong.

She looked up and scanned the judge's chambers and she saw Emil striding toward her and as he held out his hand to her, he said, "Anita, something's happened here. You see, the boys didn't want to come and they don't want to see you and so we've got them in Smokey's office down the hall. We thought we'd just go ahead and hear some testimony and maybe . . . you know . . . these family matters . . ."

"No," cried Anita and she jerked her hand away from him. "They're MY KIDS and nobody's going to turn them against me and it's already been decided that they would come with me . . ."

"Look, Anita," pleaded Emil. "Jesus Christ, it's been, how long? Five, six years? Jesus, Anita, give those kids a chance. They don't even know you."

"That's not it, Emil, that's not it." Panic rose in her. "You know that's not it. That old woman, there . . ." and she pointed to the children's grandmother, Victor's mother, Rosina, "She's the one! She's turned them against me. She never did like me and she has made them afraid of me. That's what's happened."

By this time, Anita was moving down the hall toward the office where her children were being held. Rosina, silent and fearful, moved along with her, the two women now facing each other, Emil being drawn behind them as though sleep-walking. Finally, Emil found his voice and said, "Anita, come into the judge's chambers here and we can talk about this . . ."

Now Anita had reached Smokey's office and, turning her attention inward, she softly opened the door and saw her two sons, almost grown, Jay Richard, he was three when she last held him in her arms and Victor, Jr., she had always called him Chunks, had been four when she had last seen him. Looking at them as though from a great distance she knew what fine men they would become and tears welled in her throat. She drew in her breath and with great restraint she said their names softly. As she stood before them she could see the fear and hatred in their eyes and she said, "Don't be afraid," and then, "You know me, don't you?"

Young Victor pulled Jay Richard to him as his mother reached out toward them and they both pressed themselves against the corner of the desk.

"Oh, My God," said Anita. "Look what she's done. Look what she's done to them." And she moved her hands toward her forehead and wiped the perspiration away. She stroked the hair at her temples in a gesture of anguish. Still looking at her sons, she began speaking in the tribal language of her ancestors:

"taku iniciapi he? ni Dakotapi!
You are my sons and you are Dakotahs
and your relatives are significant
people. You must remember who you
are!"

It was a plea, but Jay Richard and Victor Jr. looked back at her uncomprehendingly. Slowly they moved toward their grandmother and each took a position beside her and, finally, Chunskey said to the mother he had forgotten, "We do not want to go with you. Don't make us go with you."

The misery in the young mother's eyes was too much for Emil, himself moved almost to tears, and he took her arm and led her into the hallway.

His voice choked with emotion, he said, "Look, Anita . . . we can work this out . . . we'll have to . . ."

But before he could finish, Anita lifted her head and pushed his arm away and said, "No . . . no . . ." and she walked away from him. She didn't look back at him as she left the building, though, if she had, she would have seen that his eyes were filled with sorrow.

As she drove north she noticed that the snow had started. Soft, large flakes streaked and slanted through the air like a funnel with its tip just in front of her eyes. A long column of geese zigzagged through the gray sky toward her, and just before it fell away, she thought it seemed close enough to touch.