

Excerpt from
the Play-
Rez Sisters

Tomson
Highway

Tomson Highway

b. 1951

CREE

From *The Rez Sisters*

[In the van, driving down the highway to Toronto, at night. The women have intimate conversations, one on one, while the rest are asleep or seated at the other end of the van. Annie is driving. Emily sits beside her listening, to her Walkman, while Marie-Adele is 'leaning' over Annie's shoulder from her place in the middle seat. Veronique sits beside Marie-Adele, sleeping. Pelajia and Philomena are in the very back seat with Zhaboonigan between them.]

MARIE-ADELE: Nee, Annie, not so fast. *[Pause. Annie slows down.]* So. You couldn't get Ellen and Raymond to come along. I'd like to meet this Raymond some day.

ANNIE: *[Angrily insisting on the correct pronunciation.]* Raymond! Ellen says he's got a whole library full of cassette tapes.

MARIE-ADELE: Annie. You ever think about getting married again?

ANNIE: Not really. I can hear the band at the Silver Dollar already.

MARIE-ADELE: Do you still think about . . . Eugene?

ANNIE: What're you talkin' about? Of course, I think about him, he's my brother-in-law, ain't he?

MARIE-ADELE: He made his choice.

ANNIE: Yeah. He picked you.

MARIE-ADELE: Annie. I never stole him off you.

ANNIE: Drop dead. Shit! I forgot to bring that blouse. I mean. In case I sing. Shit!

MARIE-ADELE: If I'm gone and Eugene if he start drinkin' again. I see you going for him.

ANNIE: Why would I bother? I had my chance twenty years ago. Christ!

MARIE-ADELE: Twenty years ago, I was there.

ANNIE: Why would I want fourteen kids for?

MARIE-ADELE: That's exactly what I'm scared of. I don't want them kids to be split up. You come near Eugene you start drinking messing things up me not here I come back and don't matter where you are . . .

ANNIE: I don't want him. I don't want him. I don't want him. I don't want him. I don't want him.

EMILY: Put us all in the fuckin' ditch!

PELAJIA: Hey, watch your language up there.

ANNIE: Shit! I don't care. There's nothing more to say about it. Why don't you take your pills and go to sleep. *[Pelajia and Philomena begin talking.]*

PHILOMENA: September 8 again.

PELAJIA: Hmmm? What about September 8?

PHILOMENA: You don't remember?

PELAJIA: What?

[Annie and Emily, at the front of the van with Annie driving, are laughing and singing. 'I'm a little Indian who loves fry bread.' From time to time, they sneak each other a sip of this little bottle of whiskey Annie has hidden away inside her purse.]

I'm a little Indian who loves fry bread,
Early in the morning and when I go to bed;
Some folks say I'm crazy in the head,
Cuz I'm a little Indian who loves fry bread.

Now, some folks say I've put on a pound or two,
My jeans don't fit the way they used to do;
But I don't care, let the people talk,
Cuz if I don't get my fry bread, you'll hear me squawk.

ANNIE: So tell me. What's it like to go to a big bar like . . . I mean like . . . the Silver Dollar.

EMILY: Lotta Nishnawbs.*

ANNIE: *[Disappointed.]* Yeah? Is the music good?

EMILY: Country rock.

ANNIE: *[Screams gleefully.]* Yee-haw! Maybe the band will ask me up to sing, eh? I'll sing something fast.

EMILY: You would, too.

ANNIE: *[Sings real fast.]* 'Well, it's 40 below and I don't give a fuck, got a heater in my truck and I'm off to the rodeo. Woof!' Something like that.

EMILY: Yup. That's pretty fast.

ANNIE: Hey. Maybe Fritz the Katz will be there. Never know. Might get laid, too, eh? Remember Room 20 at the Anchor Inn? Oh, that Fritz! Sure like singin' with him. Crazy about the way . . .

EMILY: *[Starts singing Patsy Cline's famous 'Crazy' . . . crazy for feelin' so lonely . . . all the way through Annie's next speech.]*

ANNIE: . . . he stands there with his guitar and his ten-gallon hat. Is that what you call them hats? You know the kind you wear kind of off to the side like this? That's what he does. And then he winks at me. *[Sings.]* 'Crazy . . . Oooh, I love, just love the way the lights go woosh woosh in your eyes and kinda' wash all over your body. Me standing there shuffling my feet side to side, dressed real nice and going *[Sings.]* 'Oooh darlin' . . .' with my mike in my hand just so. Oh! And the sound of that band behind me. And Fritz. *[Sings.]* 'Crazy, crazy for feelin' so lonely . . .'

EMILY: Yeah. You look good on stage.

ANNIE: Yeah?

* Indians. (Ojibway)

EMILY: How come you're so keen on that guy anyway?
ANNIE: Sure Veronique St. Pierre isn't just pretending to be asleep back there?
[*Emily and Marie-Adele check Veronique in the middle seat.*]

MARIE-ADELE: Nah. Out like a lamp.
EMILY: Hey! We'll get her drunk at the Silver Dollar and leave her passed out under some table. Take two beers to do that.
ANNIE: Hey. Too bad Big Joey had to come back from Toronto before we got there, eh?

EMILY: Man! That dude's got buns on him like no other buns on the face of God's entire creation. Whoohoo! Not to mention a dick that's bigger than a goddamn breadbox. [*Annie screams gleefully.*] How about Fritz? What's his look like?

ANNIE: [*After an awkward pause.*] He's Jewish, you know.
EMILY: [*Laughing raucously.*] World's first Jewish country singer!
ANNIE: Don't laugh. Those Jews make a lot of money, you know.
EMILY: Not all of them.

ANNIE: Fritz buys me jeans and things. I'm gonna be one of them Jewish princesses.

EMILY: What's wrong with being an Indian princess?
ANNIE: Aw, these white guys. They're nicer to their women. Not like Indian guys. Screw you, drink all your money, and leave you flat on your ass.
EMILY: Yeah, right. Apple Indian Annie. Red on the outside. White on the inside.

ANNIE: Emily!
EMILY: Keep your eye on the road.
ANNIE: Good ol' highway 69.
EMILY: Hey. Ever 69 with Fritz?
MARIE-ADELE: Neece.

ANNIE: White guys don't make you do things to them. You just lie there and they do it all for you. Ellen's real happy with her Raymond. You can tell the way she sounds on the phone. Maybe someday I'll just take off with a guy like Fritz.

EMILY: Then what? Never come back to the rez? [*Annie is cornered. Emily then slaps her playfully on the arm.*] Hey. Know what? [*Sings.*]

When I die, I may not go to heaven,
I don't know if they let Indians in;
If they don't, just let me go to Wasy, lord,
Cuz Wasy is as close as I've been.

ANNIE: Lots of white people at this Silver Dollar?
EMILY: Sometimes. Depends.
ANNIE: How much for beer there?
EMILY: Same as up here. Nah! Don't need money, Annie Cook. You just gotta know how to handle men. Like me and the Rez Sisters down in Frisco.

ANNIE: Yeah?
EMILY: I'll take care of them.
ANNIE: Maybe we can find a party, eh? Maybe with the band.
EMILY: Whoa! Slow down, Annie Cook! Easy on the gas!
MARIE-ADELE: Annie! [*Pow. Black-out. They have a flat tire.*]

[*The flat tire. Everything now happens in complete darkness.*]

VERONIQUE: Bingo!
PHILOMENA: What was that? What happened?
ANNIE: I don't know. Something just went 'poof'!
EMILY: All right. Everybody out. We got a fuckin' flat.

[*They all climb out of the van.*]

VERONIQUE: Oh my god! We'll never get to the bingo.
ZHABOONIGAN: Pee pee.

PELAJIA: I can't fix a flat tire.

ANNIE: Emily can.

PELAJIA: Get the jack. Spare tire.

ANNIE: Philomena's wearing one.

ZHABOONIGAN: Pee pee.

PHILOMENA: This is all your fault, Annie Cook.

MARIE-ADELE: It's in the back.

ANNIE: So what do we do?

PELAJIA: What's the matter with Zha?

PHILOMENA: Gotta make pee pee.

VERONIQUE: I knew there was something wrong with this van the moment I set eyes on it. I should have taken the bus.

PHILOMENA: Oh shut up. Quack, quack, quack.

ANNIE: Don't look at me. It's not my fault the tires are all bald.

PHILOMENA: Nobody's blaming you.

ANNIE: But you just did.

PHILOMENA: Quack, quack, quack.

VERONIQUE: Where are we?

ANNIE: The Lost Channel. This is where you get off.

VERONIQUE: [*Groans.*] Ohhh!

EMILY: Yeah, right.

PHILOMENA: Shhh!

PELAJIA: Jack's not working too well.

EMILY: Okay. Everybody. Positions.

VERONIQUE: Not me. My heart will collapse.

EMILY: You wanna play bingo?

VERONIQUE: [*Groans.*] Ohhh!

ANNIE: Hurry up! Hurry up!

EMILY: Okay. One, two, three lift.

[*Everybody lifts and groans.*]

PELAJIA: Put the jack in there.

[*All lift, except Marie-Adele and Zha, who wander off into the moonlit darkness. Dim light on them.*]

ZHABOONIGAN: Ever dark.

MARIE-ADELE: You'll be fine, Zhaboonigan.

[*Suddenly, a nighthawk—Nanabush, now in dark feathers—appears, darting in the night.*]

ZHABOONIGAN: The birdies!

MARIE-ADELE: Yes, a birdie.

ZHABOONIGAN: Black wings!

[*Marie-Adele begins talking to the bird, almost as if she were talking to herself. Quietly, at first, but gradually—as the bird begins attacking her—growing more and more hysterical, until she is shrieking, flailing, and thrashing about insanely.*]

MARIE-ADELE: Who are you? What do you want? My children? Eugene? No! Oh no! Me? Not yet. Not yet. Give me time. Please. Don't. Please don't.

Awus! Get away from me. Eugene! Awus! You fucking bird! Awus! Awus! Awus! Awus! Awus! [*And she has a total hysterical breakdown.*]

[*Zhaboonigan, at first, attempts to scare the bird off by running and flailing her arms at it. Until the bird knocks her down and she lies there on the ground, watching in helpless astonishment and abject terror. Underneath Marie-Adele's screams, she mumbles to herself, sobbing.*]

ZHABOONIGAN: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . . Nicky Ricky Ben Mark . . . eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve . . . [*Until the other women come running. Total darkness again.*]

EMILY: What the . . .

ANNIE: Marie-Adele!

PELAJIA: Stop her! Stop her!

VERONIQUE: What's happening?

PHILOMENA: Marie Adele. Now, now . . . come . . . come . . .

EMILY: [*In the background.*] Stop that fucking screaming will ya, Marie-Adele!

PHILOMENA: Emily. There's no need to talk to her like that now.

PELAJIA: Help us get her in the van.

PHILOMENA: Come . . . come, Marie-Adele . . . everything's fine . . . you'll be fine . . . come . . . shhh . . . shhh . . .

[*And they ease Marie-Adele back into the van. Once all is beginning to settle down again.*]

PELAJIA: Everything okay now?

PHILOMENA: Yes. She's fine now.

PELAJIA: Emily, take over.

VERONIQUE: Yes. I don't trust that Annie Cook. Not for one minute.

EMILY: All set?

MARIE-ADELE: What time is it?

PELAJIA: Twenty after four.

ANNIE: Oh! We're over two hours behind schedule. Hurry up. Hurry up.

VERONIQUE: I'll be exhausted for the bingo tomorrow night. Maybe I should just take fifteen cards.

EMILY: You can rest your heart. And your mouth. All day tomorrow. All set? [*And she starts up the van. The van lights come back on.*]

[*The dialogues resume. Marie-Adele now sits in the front with Emily, who is driving. Zhaboonigan sits between them. Pelajia and Philomena are now in the middle seat, Annie and Veronique in the back.*]

EMILY: You scared the shit out of me out there. [*Silence.*] Don't do that again. [*Silence.*] Feeling better now? [*Silence.*]

MARIE-ADELE: I could be really mad, just raging mad just wanna tear his eyes out with my nails when he walks in the door and my whole body just goes 'k-k-k' . . . He doesn't talk, when something goes wrong with him, he doesn't talk, shuts me out, just disappears. Last night he didn't come home. Again, it happened. I couldn't sleep. You feel so ugly. He walks in this morning. Wanted to be alone, he said. The curve of his back, his breath on my neck, 'Adele, ki-sa-gee-ee-tin oo-ma,* making love, always in Indian, only. When we still could. I can't even have him inside me anymore. It's still growing there. The cancer. Pelajia, een-pay-see-see-yan.**

PELAJIA: You know one time, I knew this couple where one of them was dying and the other one was angry at her for dying. And she was mad because he was gonna be there when she wasn't and she had so much left to do. And she'd lie there in bed and tell him to do this and do that and he'd say 'Okay, okay.' And then he'd go into the kitchen and say to me, 'She's so this and she's so that and she's so damned difficult.' And I watched all this going on. That house didn't have room for two such angry people. But you know, I said to her, 'You gotta have faith in him and you gotta have faith in life. He loves you very much but there's only so much he can do. He's only human.' There's only so much Eugene can understand, Marie-Adele. He's only human.

EMILY: Fuckin' right. Me and the Rez Sisters, okay? Cruisin' down the coast highway one night. Hum of the engine between my thighs. Rose. That's Rosabella Baez, leader of the pack. We were real close, me and her. She was

* Adele, I love you. (Cree)

** Pelajia, I'm scared to death. (Cree)

always thinkin' real deep. And talkin' about bein' a woman. An Indian woman. And suicide. And alcohol and despair and how fuckin' hard it is to be an Indian in this country. [*Marie-Adele shushes her gently.*] No goddamn future for them, she'd say. And why, why, why? Always carryin' on like that. Chris'sakes. She was pretty heavy into the drugs. Guess we all were. We had a fight. Cruisin' down the coast highway that night. Rose in the middle. Me and Pussy Commanda off to the side. Big eighteen-wheeler come along real fast and me and Pussy Commanda get out of the way. But not Rose. She stayed in the middle. Went head-on into that truck like a fly splat against a windshield. I swear to this day I can still feel the spray of her blood against my neck. I drove on. Straight into daylight. Never looked back. Had enough gas money on me to take me far as Salt Lake City. Pawned my bike off and bought me a bus ticket back to Wasy. When I got to Chicago, that's when I got up the nerve to wash my lover's dried blood from off my neck. I loved that woman, Marie-Adele, I loved her like no man's ever loved a woman. But she's gone. I never wanna go back to San Francisco. No way, man.

MARIE-ADELE: [*Comforting the crying Emily.*] You should get some rest. Let Annie take over.

EMILY: I'll be fine. You go to sleep. Wake you up when we get to Toronto.

[*Emily puts her Walkman on and starts to sing along quietly to 'Blue Kentucky Girl' by Emmylou Harris with its 'I swear I love you ...' while Marie-Adele leans her head against the 'window' and falls asleep.*]
[*After a few moments, Zhaboonigan, who has been dozing off between Emily and Marie-Adele in the front seat, pokes her head up and starts to sing along off-key. Then she starts to play with Emily's hair.*]

EMILY: [*Shrugging Zhaboonigan's hand off.*] Don't bug me. My favourite part's comin' up.

[*Initiated by Zhaboonigan, they start playing 'slap'. The game escalates to the point where Emily almost bangs Zhaboonigan over the head with her elbow.*]

EMILY: Yeah, right. You little retard. [*Mad at this, Zhaboonigan hits Emily in the stomach.*] Don't hit me there, you little. . . . Hey, man, like ummm. . . . I'm sorry, Zha.

ZHABOONIGAN: Sorry.

EMILY: [*Emily feels her belly thoughtfully. After a brief silence.*] You gonna have kids someday, Zha?

ZHABOONIGAN: Ummm. . . buy one.

EMILY: Holy! Well, kids were all right. Aw geez, Zha, that man treated me real bad. Ever been tied to a bed post with your arms up like this? Whoa! [*Grabbing the steering wheel.*] Maybe you should drive.

ZHABOONIGAN: Scary.

EMILY: Aw, don't be scared. Fuck.

ZHABOONIGAN: Fuck.

EMILY: Zhaboonigan Peterson! Your ma'll give me a black eye.

[*Zhaboonigan turns her head toward the back seat, where Veronique sits sleeping, and says one more time, really loud.*]

ZHABOONIGAN: Fuck!

EMILY: Shhh! Look, Zha. You don't let any man bother you while we're down in T.O. You just stick close to me.

ZHABOONIGAN: Yup.

EMILY: We're sisters, right? Gimme five. [*They slap hands.*] All right. Bingo!!! [*Instantly, the house lights come on full blast. The Bingo Master—the most beautiful man in the world—comes running up centre aisle, cordless mike in hand, dressed to kill: tails, rhinestones, and all. The entire theatre is now the bingo palace. We are in: Toronto!!!!*]

BINGO MASTER: Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the biggest bingo the world has ever seen! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, tonight, we have a very, very special treat for you. Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you will be witness to events of such gargantuan proportions, such cataclysmic ramifications, such masterly and magnificent manifestations that your minds will reel, your eyes will nictitate, and your hearts will palpitate erratically.

Because tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you will see the biggest, yes, ladies and gentlemen, the very biggest prizes ever known to man, woman, beast, or appliance. And the jackpot tonight? The jackpot, ladies and gentlemen, is surely the biggest, the largest, the hugest, and the most monstrous jackpot ever conceived of in the entire history of monstrous jackpots as we know them. \$500,000! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, \$500,000 can be yours this very night! That's half a million—A HALF MILLION SMACKEROOS!!! IF you play the game right.

And all you have to do, ladies and gentlemen, is reach into your programs and extract the single bingo card placed therein. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the single bingo card placed therein, which bingo card will entitle you to one chance at winning the warm-up game for a prize of \$20. \$20! And all you have to do is poke holes in that single bingo card. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, just poke holes in that single bingo card and bend the numbers backward as the numbers are called. And don't forget the free hole in the middle of the card. Twenty dollars, ladies and gentlemen, that's one line in any direction. That means, of course, ladies and gentlemen, that the first person to form one line, just one straight line in any direction on their card, will be the very lucky winner of the \$20 prize. \$20! Are you ready, ladies and gentlemen? Are you ready? Then let the game begin! Under the G 56. Etc. . . .

[*The audience plays bingo, with the seven women, who have moved slowly into the audience during the Bingo Master's speech, playing along. Until somebody in the audience shouts, 'Bingo!'*]

BINGO MASTER: Hold your cards, ladies and gentlemen, bingo has been called. [The Bingo Master and the assistant stage manager check the numbers and the prize money is paid out.]

BINGO MASTER: And now for the game you've all been waiting for, ladies and gentlemen. Now for the big game. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, get ready for THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD! For the grand jackpot prize of \$500,000! Full house, ladies and gentlemen, full house! Are you ready? Are you ready? Then let the game begin!

[The house lights go out. And the only lights now are on the bingo balls bouncing around in the bingo machine—an eerie, surreal sort of glow—and on the seven women who are now playing bingo with a vengeance on centrestage, behind the Bingo Master, where a long bingo table has magically appeared with Zhaboonigan at the table's centre banging a crucifix. Veronique has brought along for good luck. The scene is lit so that it looks like 'The Last Supper'.]

[The women face the audience. The bingo table is covered with all the necessary accoutrements: bags of potato chips, cans of pop, ashtrays (some of the women are smoking), etc. The Bingo Master calls out number after number—but not the B14—with the women improvising responses. These responses—Philomena has 27 cards!—grow more and more raucous: 'B 14? Annie Cook? One more number to go! The B 14! Where is that B 14? Gimme that B 14! Where the fuck is that B 14?!' etc. Until the women have all risen from the table and come running downstage, attacking the bingo machine and throwing the Bingo Master out of the way. The women grab the bingo machine with shouts of: 'Throw this fucking machine into the lake! It's no damn good!' etc. And they go running down centre aisle with it and out of the theatre. Bingo cards are flying like confetti. Total madness and mayhem. The music is going crazy.]

[And out the this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele walking romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master. The Bingo Master says 'Bingo' into her ear. And the Bingo Master changes, with sudden bird-like movements, into the nighthawk, Nanabush in dark feathers. Marie-Adele meets Nanabush.] [During this next speech, the other women, one by one, take their positions around Marie-Adele's porch, some kneeling, some standing. The stage area, by means of 'lighting magic', slowly returns to its Wasaychigan Hill appearance.]

MARIE-ADELE: U-wi-nuk u-wa? U-wi-nuk u-wa? Eugene? Nee. U-wi-nuk ma-a oo-ma kee-tha? Ka. Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma so that's who you are . . . at rest upon the rock . . . the master of the game . . . the game . . . it's me . . . nee-tha . . . come . . . come . . . don't be afraid . . . as-tum . . . come . . . to . . . me . . . ever soft wings . . . beautiful soft . . . soft . . . dark wings . . .

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here . . . take me . . . as-tum . . . as-tum . . . pee-na-sin . . . wings . . . here . . . take me . . . take me . . . me . . . with . . . pee-na-sin . . .

[As Nanabush escorts Marie-Adele into the spirit world, Zhaboonigan, uttering a cry, makes a last desperate attempt to go with them. But Emily rushes after and catches her at the very last split second. And the six remaining women begin to sing the Ojibway funeral song. By the beginning of the funeral song, we are back at the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, at Marie-Adele's grave.]

* Marie-Adele: Who are you? Who are you? Eugene? Nee. Then who are you really? Oh. It's you, so that's who you are . . . at rest upon the rock . . . the master of the game . . . the game . . . it's me . . . me . . . come . . . come . . . don't be afraid . . . come . . . the game . . . ever soft wings . . . beautiful soft . . . soft . . . dark wings . . . here . . . to . . . me . . . come . . . come and get me . . . wings here . . . take me . . . take me . . . with . . . come and get me . . . (Cree)

The Lover Snake

The magazine photograph is of a Sikh. A mala Sikh. Male Sikhs wear turbans. It's a tradition that goes back many, many generations, so it is said. You can always tell a Sikh when you see one by the turban he wears. Just as I recall, also wear beards like this one in the photograph does. Fine beards. A fine-boned people. A fine-looking people. This particular Sikh, the man in the photograph, has, pictured with him, the uppermost portion of a large snake slithering down over the front and centre of the bright orange turban he wears, the snake's diamond-shaped head, with its bearded eyes, nostrils, just centimetres over the man's forehead, its flickering tongue slicing air between his eyes. This is the photograph in the magazine.

Dahljeet has always worn a turban, as I remember. In fact, he has an entire closet full of them, and his home in Vancouver, British Columbia, is a Sikh people. Now Dahljeet and I have been friends for many years. An unusual alliance, I would have to say, from time to time. And between us, Dahljeet and me, we would have to say the friendship was an unusual friendship. I mean, there he was, very much an Indian and here I was, also very much an Indian. Only we were such clearly different kinds of Indian. Worlds apart, so different, was laughable. And we'd laugh. North Cree hunter ambles down the slope of Robson Street beside north Indian maharajah. An odd pair. To be sure, we were both just short of twenty years of age. And yet, we became close. Dahljeet and I. More than friends, more than brotherly, more than lovers, even. It was, in those days, in the midst of certain fairly unexpected moments in time we spent together, there would arrive from somewhere a certain buzzing half-sound, a certain indescribable as perfect in pitch and purity as the tone of a tuning fork. It was beautiful. We met when we were both just short of twenty years of age.

Dahljeet would talk of elephant parades at magnificent royal weddings in