



FROM THE ASHES

MY STORY OF BEING MÉTIS, HOMELESS,
AND FINDING MY WAY



JESSE THISTLE

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This book is dedicated to the families whose loved ones are taken, or disappeared, or lost to them. Those forever watching for their loved one to return home. I watch and wait with you.

It is also dedicated to Indigenous children who grew up with no sense of themselves through projects like the Sixties Scoop, residential schools, adoption, or other such separation from their nuclear family during which they were robbed of their Indigenous identity through no fault of their own.

The pages of this book speak to the damage colonialism can do to Indigenous families, and how, when one's Indigeneity is stripped away, people can make poor choices informed by pain, loneliness, and heartbreak, choices that see them eventually cast upon the streets, in jail, or wandering with no place to be. I dedicate this book to you. I walk with you. I love you. I know the loneliness and frustration you endure.

Lastly, I dedicate this book to my wife, Lucie, who loved me back into the circle. This also goes out to my brothers, Josh, Jerry, and Daniel; my mom and dad; and to my grandparents, who gave me a fighting chance. Our circle is strong; our fire burns; this book is but a torch from the hearth of our clans, and is hopefully enough to light the way for others to follow.

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INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

at night
alone
when the dope sickness set in
and the begging became too humiliating
I'd wander from the ByWard Market to the Centennial Flame fountain
on Parliament Hill
looking for respite from my addictions.

ashamed
i sat with my back to the Peace Tower
thrust my hand in the cool fountain water
fishing out the hoard of coins thrown by tourists and passersby.

the RCMP who guarded the fountain
always saw me coming
from way down at the bottom of the Rideau Hill
near the Milestones and Château Laurier
but he never stopped me.

instead he'd sit and wait for me
watch as I shovelled wet change into my pockets.
then, before I got too greedy,
rush out and chase me away.

he always let me escape.

we both understood what was going on

why I was there

stealing from the Centennial Flame.

PROLOGUE

The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.

Matthew 11:12

THE DEAD SILENCE SCREAMED DANGER.

Frenzied squeaks of jail-issued blue deck shoes on sealed cement followed by wet smacks, fast pops, loud cracks, and finally a dull thud confirmed it. A guy lay crumpled on the range floor, our range quartermaster told us. He wasn't conscious. His legs were seized straight, quivering uncontrollably. He had pissed and shit himself.

We didn't need to see it with our own eyes. The unseen, the unknown, in jail is often worse than the seen, the known.

The next day, after cell search, I heard that he had died en route to hospital.

Someone said he'd stolen a bag of chips from another inmate's canteen, but who knew?

Who cared?

It was jail justice. The thief got what he deserved. According to us, according to society. At least that's what I told myself. All I knew for sure was that I didn't know anything and I hadn't seen anything. I'd only

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heard it, but I wouldn't even tell the guards that much. I had to survive, and the only way you did that was by keeping your mouth shut, turning your head away.

What was I doing here in jail anyway? Why had I put myself in the midst of this filth, this horrible violence?

The answer was simple.

I did it to save my leg—and my life.

LOST AND ALONE



1979-1987

A LITTLE BOY'S DREAM

I had this tiny bag
Had it since my family fell apart
It was red and blue with an Adidas logo on the side
And a golden zipper—the zipper of all zippers!

I had this tiny bag
I took it everywhere with me
When we moved with Dad
Hopped out windows at night
When we ran and ran
On to our next place.

I had this tiny bag
Grandma asked me to unpack it
But I wouldn't do it.
She asked many times after that
But I kept it filled with all my things
Tucked away
Under my bed
Just in case.

I had this tiny bag
It had my old life inside
When I finally got the courage to get rid of it

I left it on my bed
Then jumped out my window
Down two stories
But the grass broke my fall.

"Why did you do that, Baby Boy?" Grandma asked.

"Because I always dream of dying," I said. "And I can't take it to heaven
with me."

ROAD ALLOWANCE

MY KOKUM NANCY'S PALM FELT leathery in mine as we walked alongside of the train tracks. Stands of poplar swayed and bent in the wind, and she stood still for a second to catch her bearings and watch the flat-bottomed, late-spring clouds slouch by. She mumbled, then began thrusting her gnarled walking stick into the tall brush ahead, spreading it open, looking for flashes of purple or blue. Purple was a clear sign that the pregnant Saskatoon berry bushes were ready to give birth and ease the winter suffering of bears, birds, and humans.

Berries, Kokum said, knew well their role as life-givers, and we had to honour and respect that. We did that by knowing our role as responsible harvesters, picking only what we needed and leaving the rest for our animal kin so they could feed themselves and their young. That was our pact, she said, and if we followed it, they'd never let us down.

My kokum wore brownish-yellow eyeglasses the size of teacup saucers, but her eyes could still see things my three-year-old eyes couldn't. I always tried to search out berry patches before she did, but she always got there first. Always.

As we waded deeper through the rail-side grass and reeds, a vast fleet of mosquitoes and gnats lifted from the ditch floor and enveloped our heads. A few flew into my mouth, choking me. I coughed and batted at the air.

“No, Jesse.” Kokum grabbed my arms and held them. “They are our relatives. Never do that!” I’d never seen her angry before, but she was now.

As the black cloud intensified around us, she drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and spoke softly in Michif. She pointed to me and our half-full pail of berries, and then to the rat-root plant that protruded out of her dress pocket. Her voice sounded like warm summer air swooshing over the open prairie right before rain comes, and reminded me of when I’d accidentally disturbed the hornet’s nest behind the smoke shed. There was no anger in her voice then. The plume of insects hovered mid-air for a second, then flew skyward and dispersed. Just like the hornets had done.

I looked at her in amazement, and my mouth opened but no sound came out. I strained to hear any buzzing, but there was only the call of a loon far in the distance followed by the shuffle of Kokum’s moccasins.

“Oh, my silent one,” Kokum said. “I just told them we have a job to do.” Her brown face cracked into a smile. “I asked them to visit us later, if they must, but for now we need to concentrate.” She brushed a few strands of hair from my face and hoisted me over a puddle. “Or maybe they’re right, maybe it’s quitting time. Let’s get back, *chi garçon*; we have enough to make a good bannock.”

I loved Kokum’s bannock more than anything—even harvesting with her, listening to her stories, or hearing her sing. She made it whenever we visited. We lived in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, about an hour’s drive away from my grandparents’. Their cabin was in Erin Ferry, near Debden, just south of Big River, between the old Highway 1 on one side and the new Highway 55 on the other. The CN Railway cut right up the centre of the road allowance, connecting Debden to Big River and on to the rest of Saskatchewan.

My grandparents’ log cabin wasn’t like any other place I knew. Mom told us that her dad, Mushoom Jeremie Morrissette, had made it by hand from the surrounding aspen hardwood after our family lost our homestead in Park Valley, a few kilometres away. It took him one season to fell the trees, strip them of bark, and build it, and another half season to

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chink in the cracks with mud and moss, waterproof the roof, and make it ready for winter living. Nobody else had a neat house like my kokum and Mushoom, way out in the country in the middle of nowhere, with no water or electricity.

Mushoom said there weren't many people like us anymore, rebels who fended for themselves—maybe a few Arcand relatives down the road, but that was about it. The rest had sold out and got farms or went to the city to find work. He didn't own his land; it belonged to the Queen of England.

"She doesn't mind us being here," Mushoom said. "And it lets me hunt and trap freely and be my own boss, which I like."

He told us stories about how our people once had lived in large communities in handmade houses just like his all over Saskatchewan, living off the land, but that was before the government attacked us and stole our land during the resistance, before our clans fell apart.

I couldn't understand what he was talking about. I tried imagining villages of our people living like he and my kokum did, in their little log house, all squished onto little pieces of land owned by the Queen, and I couldn't. But there were beaver, muskrat, deer, bears, elk, and fish everywhere; forest, streams, and rivers all around to play in; and no neighbours for miles and miles.

"If someone tries to push us around, we just pick up and move somewhere else," Mushoom said. "We live like this to be free, like our ancestors."

I understood that.

When Kokum and I came back from berry picking, Mushoom was standing at the front door of the cabin. The elk-horn buttons that fastened his beige leather vest strained to hold it together over his rounded stomach. Kokum made all of Mushoom's clothes from animals he trapped and materials she traded for in Debden on her monthly visit to town.

"Where are Blanche and Sonny?" Kokum called to him, her brow wrinkling. My parents' car had been in the dirt driveway when we left to

go picking, but now there was just my mushroom's plump horse drinking from the trough at the side of the house.

"They went into town. Should be back soon. Fire's ready, though."

Kokum nodded, picked up a pail of rainwater for the washing, and nudged Mushroom aside as she carried it inside. The smell of burnt hardwood licked all around my grandfather's bald head as he bent down to hug me. The press of his fancy vest against my exposed belly felt like thousands of soft pebbles. Blazes of prairie roses, windflowers, big blue-stems, hyssops, leadplants, and asters decorated his clothing in beaded patterns that Kokum said were passed down to her from her Michif-Nehiyaw ancestors—mothers to daughters—for over two centuries.

When Mushroom played the fiddle at night, I loved watching moonbeams flickering over his beads—it looked like he was wearing rubies and diamonds all over. And when he tapped his feet to the rhythm of reels he told us were passed down from his grandfather's grandfather, the light lulled me to sleep.

Josh and Jerry were inside the cabin playing on the floor with the wooden toys Mushroom had carved for them while we were out. Jerry's was a captain's sword, and Josh's was a little marionette man that jigged when



Mushoom Jeremie and Kokum Nancy (née Arcand) Morrissette, in their road-allowance home in Erin Ferry, Saskatchewan.

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you held the stick that protruded out its back. Mushroom could carve things in five minutes flat. Jerry always got the best toys because Jerry was his favourite grandson, being his namesake and all.

Sometimes Josh and I would get jealous of Jerry. He crawled all over Mushroom's stomach and they both bellowed until tears came out of their eyes. Or Mushroom would take Jerry into the woods to show him his traps and a thing or two about snaring rabbits. He never did that with us. He'd hug us, but it wasn't the same. Jerry even kind of looked like him: stout, thick-legged, and broad across the shoulders. He was like Mushroom, too: powerful, strong-willed, and stubborn.

Josh was tall and thin. Out of all of us, he looked the most "Indian," or at least that's what Mom would say when she brushed his long black hair in the morning. She always took her time with Josh, and I could see that he was her favourite. His skin was much darker than Jerry's and mine, and he looked more like Mom than Dad. Korean or Japanese almost. Everyone was proud of Josh. He was the oldest and smartest and talked the most, and whatever new clothes we got from our aunts and uncles went to him. I'd eventually get them, but not until after Josh and Jerry.

I was much smaller and skinnier than both my brothers and had blond shoulder-length hair. My skin looked like my father's—pinkish cream. People were always saying, "He looks like a little white boy" or "You sure he wasn't switched at the hospital?" Mom said it didn't matter, because I was special. She said that I was the largest of all her babies, a little over ten pounds when I was born in 1976—as long as a carnival hot dog with a huge oblong head—and the doctors were shocked when I came out.

"You didn't make a sound," Mom said. "No screams or whimpers or nothing, just a wet *plop* sound."

I stayed quiet my first three years. The most noise I'd make was a cry or an incomprehensible squeal of excitement.

"Look here," Mushroom said, as he placed me on the floor with my brothers. He pulled a small wooden knife out of his back pocket. It was just little enough for me to grasp. I waved it in front of him, and he

jumped back. Jerry charged at me, coming to Mushroom's rescue. Mushroom scooped him up before he could impale me with his wooden sabre.

Heat and the smell of lard radiated from the wood stove. Kokum opened its door to chuck in a few logs, and the muscles on her arms rippled. She was strong. One time a dog almost bit Josh near the road and Kokum threw a cast-iron skillet at it with one flick of her wrist, like a ninja star. The skillet whistled thirty feet in the air and the dog ran into the forest whining and never bugged any of us again.

I watched her as she wiped the dirt off her hands and put rolled-up bannock balls in the skillet. As they hissed and spit into the air, I could hear my parents' car screeching to a stop outside. They were fighting, like always. Mushroom said something to Kokum in Cree. I thought she was going to toss the frying pan, oil and all, out the door at my dad. She just wagged her head, though.

Mom leaned in the front door and announced, "We're going home, boys. Pull your stuff together."

Dad didn't come in. I peeked out the door. Music was blasting from the car, the windows were rolled up, and the inside was flooded with smoke.

"But, Blanche," Kokum said, "we've picked berries for the bannock."

"Can't," Mom said. "Sonny needs to get back. Damn idiot's gotta meet someone. Come, boys, hurry it up."

My mother was just fifteen when she met my father in 1973 at her sister Bernadette's house in Debden, Saskatchewan. According to my aunts, my mother was just about the prettiest Native girl in all northern Saskatchewan—a Michif Audrey Hepburn crossed with Grace Kelly and Hedy Lamarr. Silken black hair down to her waist, jet-black eyes, and a smile like a midnight flame. They said men hovered around her like moths, and that when Dad first laid eyes on her, he tripped all

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over himself to catch her. He chatted her up, bought her stuff, and fawned over her. He looked like a bumbling fool, my aunties said, all the men did.

But Dad was different. He was an Algonquin-Scot, although my uncles tell me he knew himself as a white man. He wasn't much to look at—chubby around the middle, with a pockmarked face and broken fighter's teeth, and his usual jean outfit was slick with traveller's patina. But there was something charming about him, an ability to talk and a boldness. That apparently came from his rough blue-collar upbringing north of Toronto, where he learned to hustle or perish. He also loved rock music. Deep Purple, Foghat, Jethro Tull, Black Sabbath, Johnny and Edgar Winter—he knew all their songs and more, how they were written and the stories behind their creation.

Mom was stuck in the 1950s, listening to old country music—the Carter Family, Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, Bill Monroe, Don Messer, anyone of the sort. She did know some modern music—Bob Dylan, the Doors, the Guess Who, Joni Mitchell—but she couldn't match my father. My aunties said Mom told them Dad was like a jukebox, with info on all the hottest bands. That made him like a god in northern Saskatchewan,



My mother, Blanche Morrissette, and father, Cyril "Sonny" Thistle, in 1977 in Debden, Saskatchewan.

where no one knew anything about rock, or Led Zeppelin, or Jimi Hendrix, or anything.

It made him irresistible, Mom said.

The side of my mom's face was blue. It wasn't that way before she left. And her voice sounded the way I didn't like. Mushoom examined her, and I knew he could see her broken glasses sticking out of her pocket when she went into the back room. He pushed himself up from the table, swore, and reached for his axe.

I thought he was going to kill my dad. Josh, Jerry, and I all started crying.

"Stop, Jeremie," Kokum yelled. She pulled the axe out of his hand and threw it beside the stove. "This is between them," she said, her voice sounding the way it had when she spoke with the mosquitoes.

Mushoom sneered, then stared out the window. Dad didn't notice. I could see him drumming his hands against the steering wheel.

Mom came back with some things. "Sorry, Mom, Dad. Next time we'll stay for bannock." She picked up our toys, then piled us into the car. She was like a whirlwind—we didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. As soon as we were in the car, Dad floored it. The wheels kicked up a cloud of dirt, and I could just see my kokum and mushoom waving to us through it.