

Notes of a Mad Girl #9 - Mom, Indians, and Schrum's Dairy

My life in Marland, Oklahoma was both a surprise and a whack on the head every day. I slept on a cot in the kitchen and began my early mornings usually cleaning up debris thrown on the floor the night before by angry, drugged, and drunken teenagers.

These same kids were remarkably quiet and kind in the daylight hours but just when I thought that the possibility of a quiet evening was possible, a car load of young Indians would show up at the Center about eleven o'clock ready to pick a fight with the one white person who understood their need to vent frustration and the one person willing to let them. Most of these kids were related to Martha and she was as unable to stop this cycle as I was.

I loved Martha's family. Even though I was in a constant state of surprise at those wild evenings I just as easily sat with these same kids every day and made them salt and pepper soup with fry bread. They were just normal sweet kids during the day and they helplessly stirred up the pot of bad legacy, tribal decimation, and humiliation at night.

The main story, however, is not about the young kids in the Ponca or Pawnee tribes. The real story is about the people who were not Indian. You only had to sit in that miniscule Indian Center in Marland, Oklahoma to really start seeing what racism looks like in the mid-west. I couldn't understand why the car I was a passenger in could not get gasoline at the pump as quickly as a vehicle that pulled in ten minutes after us. I'd finally walk to the office and only when they saw a white girl did they start pumping. My friends never got angry at the only gas station attendant or owner in their small town. They were quiet and they suffered deep in a place that was dug with lies and promises by people who they never met or had the opportunity to hurt. It was a "no gas policy" by association.

It wasn't long before I got to experience hatred first hand. During one of only a few quiet evenings at the Center the phone rang. A bullet went whizzing past my head as I answered the phone. I crouched

down and looked towards the direction of the shot. The glass was broken on one side of the room and the bullet exited out the opposite window. There was a person in the phone booth. I didn't know if this person shot the gun but this guy was looking directly at me. I called the operator and asked her to call the police. I told her what happened and she said that something was really strange here. The phone rang not only at the police station but also at the Marland School. We both agreed that calling the police was rather pointless since our phone appeared to be tapped.

Martha didn't say much about the shooting and from that night on one of her older daughters, Thomasine became my new roommate. Life changed drastically for me at the Center and I unquestionably embraced whatever Thomasine's past meant to the folks around that place. It was obvious that no one messed with this woman and that if you did, you would never survive. My naïve-ness faded away seeing Thomasine check her gun at night and her presence threw cold water on any late night Indian misdemeanors.

My mom sent me \$5.00 a week and her charity kept me in food until her very much anticipated letter the following week. The deal with Martha was that she would give me a place to live and would feed me. Her notion of eating three meals a day didn't really apply to me and I spent a lot of time thinking about food. I loved making fry bread but without fruits and vegetables my teeth were starting to hurt and my stomach was growing a fry-bread belly. It was also my mom's money that was feeding these kids at lunch and my culinary supplies were limited to flour, chicken broth, rice and sugar.

Mom called one day while loads of my Indian friends were in line to take showers at the center. She bluntly asked if the Indians lived in teepees. Did they wear clothes? Did they speak English? I now saw how wide the chasm was between people of two distinct races living in the same country. You never really feel that you're a "race" until someone else hammers it so negatively into your different colored hair. Mom wasn't being mean but just wanted to have a picture of my life in her head. Her picture, however, was built on those John Wayne movies where Indians circled wagons of screaming women and children while wearing loincloths and riding painted ponies.

Watching westerns with my new friends was hysterical. They'd be screaming about the dumb moves the acting Indians were making and they paid close attention to the horse back riding. They also booed when an Indian actor or actress was really Mexican or Caucasian. They'd also act out the proper hunting skills or riding skills and finish the movie with a more realistic ending. John Wayne always died and although they laughed and joked at the end of the movie there was a sadness that just didn't ever disappear.

I watched a small Indian child about six or seven walk down the center of our lonely highway in the middle of a school day. I called him into the Center and fed him fry bread. What had happened? Why was he going home alone and unaccompanied from school? He said they sent him home because he didn't have any tennis shoes for gym class. I called my Indian lawyer hot-line in Anadarko and they took it from there. Not many people are aware that there are monies available to help Indians pay for tennis shoes, prom dresses, and books. But Marland took this Indian money and bought band uniforms for their school. The icing on this seemingly kind gesture was that they wouldn't let Indians participate in the band.

But the most beautiful moments with Martha Grass were before the sun rose early in the morning. When I slept at her house out in the prairie over the weekends she would wake me and we'd sit under the huge sky and wait for the morning to say its hello. She never woke any of her own kids or their sleep-over friends...she saved this ritual for me. She started singing a sad yet heart pounding repetitive chant as the sky began its first waves of color and when it looked like she personally had pulled the sun out of the horizon she'd walk wordlessly back into the house to sleep.

But one day I drove off with a troupe of Indians heading to Washington, D.C. on what was called the "Trail of Broken Treaties". This was 1972 and Indians across the United States and Canada were mad. This new "Trail" was in commemoration of the "Trails of Tears" and I was heading to D.C. with my new tribe. Yet being the only white person in an auditorium filled with young angry Indians in Lawrence, Kansas was more than I was able to manage. So I hitchhiked back to Marland. The look of disappointment on Martha's face almost made me welcome

those few hundred angry Indians back in Kansas. Martha's plan was for me to witness this new, unfolding story in Washington, D.C.. This was not only the story of the daily shenanigans at the Indian Center but the larger picture of Indians deeply in trouble in a county that sings and rejoices about the "home of the free, the home of the brave". The words of freedom didn't include the very people who lived here long before the pilgrims began eating Turkey on our shores.

Martha Grass was one determined Indian Medicine Woman. She was a woman who marched side by side with Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. When she spoke she was formidable and she managed to keep both parties in that section of Oklahoma from seriously hurting one another. It didn't hurt that Martha almost killed a woman with a guitar or that her daughter Thomasine had a serious history of physical persuasion.

It was a Saturday and we had all merrily packed for our trip to D.C. to join in the "Trail of Broken Treaties". There was one bus going and forty selected Indians would be seeing the sights of Washington. But something was wrong. The center was filled with quiet, mad Indians and Martha was glued to the telephone. She talked in both English and her native language and the tension was growing pretty unbearable in that house. As people walked by me they'd glance up at me and quickly look away. No one spoke directly to me. It was then that I realized that Martha kept using an Indian word I was familiar with. She was using it as a subject...it referred to me. I walked up to her and said "is there a problem and is it about me?"

She said that the Ponca Indians were unable to find the \$1,500. to pay for the bus and she told everyone that she'd find the money with one restriction. She said that my seat on the bus was worth \$1,500. to her and that I was going with her on that bus no matter what. After telling me the problem, the other Indians had no hesitation speaking in hearing distance that once again a white person was taking something from a deserving Indian. Within fifteen minutes the Quakers in D.C. had wired the whole amount to the bus company. We packed into vehicles for the trip to Ponca City and the walk to the bus through that gauntlet of staring and silent Indians was a hard walk for me. When another lucky rider noted loudly about my presence, Martha barked that "this

girl was worth a hundred of you and she needed one level headed person to help her with the kids and other stuff". I worked diligently to prove Martha right but I can't say that the stares or the tone of speaking on that bus ever reached a comfortable level. My character was being built one mile after another on the way to our grand capital whether I liked it or not.

But I didn't tell my mother about my change of plans. Mom thought I was with the Lawrence, Kansas group and she waited patiently at the Irwin Turnpike in Pennsylvania in hopes of seeing her daughter. When she flagged the cars down she realized that I was not with the group. That didn't stop her from purchasing tires for one of the cars or getting Shrum's dairy to donate gallons of milk to this cause. Just thinking of Indians sitting on the side of the toll road eating glazed doughnuts from the Jeannette Bakery with fresh milk still makes me smile.

Now my mother was worried. Where was I? She called the Indian Center and they told her I was in Washington. When our bus pulled alongside at least fifty yellow buses we unloaded our belongings into an African American Church. That one organization was, after a flurry of Indian gossip, the only place that opened up their doors to the first Americans. It was election year and the request to camp out at the National Monument like other groups was denied. But this community center had rats and had loads of them. Seeing an Iroquois Indian pull out an arrow and shoot a large rat was a stunning feat of archery. The Indian leaders were embarrassed and they were mad. You see...the various tribes wanted to protest but they also dearly wanted to see this city chock full of monuments and history. They collectively thought of themselves as true Americans and loved their country. They all brought their binoculars and they were armed with tourist maps.

We were told to immediately get back onto the buses and we drove to the Bureau of Indian Affairs building. These Indians wanted answers and they were going to the one organization that belonged to them. Where things went wrong I still don't know for sure but there was a scuffle in a hallway between Federal Officials and some Indians. The Indians then locked all the doors with us inside.

We were told that anyone who wanted to leave could stay at the Red Cross but that those who wanted to stay and protest Indian conditions and years of broken treaties should stay. Only forty or so people from our bus knew that I wasn't Indian and they had collectively decided that it just didn't matter. Martha told others that I was Cherokee and that was now my story.

Imagine my shock when Martha Grass, her nephew Carter Camp, and three A.I.M. (American Indian Movement) men walked up to me and said that I had a phone call and that they wanted to listen in on the conversation. They said the caller identified himself as the police chief of Washington and he wanted to speak directly to me. He asked if I was Karin Broker and when I said "yes" he said "you need to call your mother".