

ONE *second*
AT A TIME

MY STORY
OF PAIN AND RECLAMATION

DIANE MORRISSEAU,
with ELISABETH BRANNIGAN

Foreword by Marlyn Bennett



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A Perfect Home

FOR THE LONGEST TIME I thought it was normal not to remember anything before eight or nine years old. When I heard my friends talk about things that happened when they were young, I thought they were lying. When I began my healing journey, I had to look back to understand my life and all that has happened to me. Initially, I had to learn about my early childhood from what people told me. For the longest time I had no memories of my own. Then one day, I began to have flashbacks. Memories from those early years flooded into my consciousness, vivid but incomplete. Looking back was like trying to piece together a series of dreams and nightmares. Making sense of these foggy glimpses into the early events of my life has helped me to understand why things happened the way they did. Facing the realities of my childhood is still painful, but seeking the truth led me to a place where I could learn to forgive those who hurt me, and to forgive myself.

I was born in 1943 on Sagkeeng First Nation, an Ojibway-Anishinabe community situated where the Winnipeg River empties into Lake Winnipeg. My biological parents were J.B. Morrisseau and Annie Gerard. I have six biological siblings – five sisters and one brother; Joanne being the

oldest, followed by Martha, Helena, Rita, and Caroline, then Joseph, Juliana, and myself being the youngest.

When I was a baby, we lived in Victoria Beach where my biological dad was working at the time. I never really knew him because he left when I was still a baby. Most of what I know about my parents came from my Auntie Agnes. She was my mother's sister, and I became very close to her. She's gone now too. From what my Auntie Agnes told me, my dad was a hard worker and good provider. I used to go hide at her place sometimes when I would run away from my husband, Edgar. After seeing my bruises and black eyes, she would often tell me, "That's one thing your dad never did." She'd add, "Your mom never had marks on her face or black eyes. Yeah, he was a womanizer, but he was a good provider and he never laid a hand on your mom."

My Auntie Agnes also shared a few stories about my mother, who was very pretty, fair with a few little freckles. She told me once, "You're so much like your mom. You know, she liked to sew clothes. She sewed her own dresses and clothes for her children, just like you do now." I guess I was like her all right, because I sewed a lot when my kids were small. I made blankets when I could get old winter coats. I would take them apart, cut them in squares, and sew them together. I used to like hearing these stories about my mother. I was also told that she liked to laugh, and that she liked dancing to music on the radio. That was another thing I had in common with her.

I was in my forties when I learned about what happened to my mother. I don't know if I want to talk about those things, about how she died. It's odd, but when I found out that my dad had cheated on my mother, I didn't really have an issue with it. I felt it was their business. I was less forgiving of my mother. She was hurt and very angry because my dad was cheating on her. My dad gave her a sexually transmitted

infection over and over again. Finally, it got to the point where she didn't want to get better. She just let it kill her. The sickness killed her because she refused to go to the hospital. She just wanted to die. I think she could have gotten better if she had wanted to. Initially I thought, "What a selfish woman. She just thought of herself. She left me here to suffer all over the place. You might as well say she killed herself." I suffered without her, and it took me a long time to forgive her once I knew the truth.

For the longest time I felt abandoned and betrayed by my mother for choosing to give up. Eventually I realized that she was suffering, and I understood her desperation. I saw myself in her. My mother experienced a lot of the same things that I experienced. It is incredible how history seems to repeat itself, sometimes in the strangest of ways. Not only did my husband cheat on me, too, he actually fooled around with the daughters of these women who had affairs with my dad. So I had to face what happened to my mother to deal with the things that happened to me too. Finding forgiveness for my mother helped me heal and forgive myself and those people who hurt us both. I can't carry that stuff.

I was only six months old when my mother died. My dad sent us away the same day she died, and then went out west alone. When they took us, I was on the bed with some of my siblings who were all playing, jumping, and laughing. My oldest sister, Joanne, who must have been about twelve at this time, was looking after us. It was my father's uncle, John Morrisseau, and his wife, Clara, who brought all of us kids downstairs. Juliana talked about seeing our sister Rita being taken away and being put into a boat and crossing the river with a family. She talked about feeling sad and wanting to go with her.

We were separated. Some of us were placed with family or in foster homes while the older ones were sent to residential

school. I was in a few different foster homes in the months following my mother's death. I've learned since then that they weren't very good homes. It was good that I was adopted before too long. I was the only one of my siblings who ever really had a home. None of them were adopted; they were all just kind of sent from place to place.

Since I was too young to remember when my siblings and I were taken, I didn't even know about them for the longest time. It was not until I was around ten years old when my sister Juliana and brother Joseph came to live with us that I learned the truth. Before then, Juliana and Joseph went to residential school, and I think they stayed at our Auntie Esther's when they weren't in school. It would have been in the early 1950s that they began staying with us during their holidays. It was kind of strange when they first came. Nobody prepared me, and I had no idea that they were my sister and brother. No one even ever told me I was adopted or that I had biological siblings. I don't even know how I found out they were my sister and brother when they came for the first time. It was like they suddenly appeared and were just there, a part of the family we'd never talked about.

There was only a two-year age difference between Juliana and me. We got along really well. Every summer they would come to stay with us, and Juliana and I became very close as we got older. We talked about everything. We used to do a lot of stupid things together, and we laughed all the time. We used to like laughing, and I remember I made her laugh a lot. She'd even have tears in her eyes because she'd be laughing so much. We were good friends.

Joseph, on the other hand, was quiet. He was given chores to do, which he did without complaint, and he was always helpful around the house. But Joseph didn't like me. I didn't get along with him and I was scared of him. As we got older, things got very complicated. His actions had a profound

impact on my body image and self-esteem. He left when I was about thirteen and I never saw him again.

I never really had a relationship with my oldest sister Joanne, and we were never all that close. She was much older than me and wasn't around much. Maybe that's why we were never close. I wasn't close to my sister Helena when we were kids either, but we met as young adults and got along. I would stay with her sometimes as we got older. Helena was called Weegwas (which means "birch bark" in Ojibway) because she was so fair.

My other sister Rita lived with the Spences growing up. It was Maria Spence that brought her up. They lived in Powerview, a white community near the reserve. I think the Spences kept my sister Joanne also. She was twelve and in residential school though, so she wouldn't have been there much. When she turned sixteen, she got married and left school. She didn't stay with that guy too long because he drank a lot and wasn't very nice to her. She remarried a white guy from Lac du Bonnet who treated her better. They had two sons and a daughter. My sister Juliana and I used to go visit them once in a while.

I was about eight years old or so when I last saw Caroline. She came to stay with us for a little while during the summer holidays that year. It was just for that one summer though, and then I never saw her again after that. Apparently when she turned sixteen years old, she left school and hitchhiked to Vancouver to find our dad. That's how my sister Caroline ended up out there, and she never came back.

I think she died in 1967. She would have been thirty-two years of age. It's a sad story. I just met her kids recently. Her daughter found me. We'd been looking for each other for over thirty-seven years. I thought they were in Hong Kong. When my sister died, their father, who was Chinese, told my dad that he was going to take them there. So for years that's

where I thought they were, but all this time they were in Vancouver! We just found each other about ten years ago. I went to Vancouver to meet them. My niece has four children – two sons and two daughters. It meant a lot to me to connect with them. My sister Juliana also moved to Vancouver and lived with Caroline for a couple of years, but she came back.

Rita was the last of my biological siblings living. She passed on a few years ago. Rita was about five years older than me, so we weren't all that close growing up. But she was always good to me when we saw each other. I'll always remember that. We got closer as we got older. In the last few years of her life she lived in the care home in Sagkeeng, so I would drive there to visit her whenever I could.

My siblings became such an important part of my life as I got older. It's hard to believe that in the early years of my life I didn't even know they existed. I am grateful that I did get to know them and that I was able to make some real connections with my family. Many kids who are taken from their homes and put into care never have that chance.

Not only was I adopted, but I never had to change my surname. It was my biological dad's uncle John Morrisseau and his wife Clara who adopted me. I called him Papa, but he was actually my mishom, which means "grandfather" in Ojibway. It was my adopted sister Virginia who explained it all to me. Sometimes I wonder if maybe that's why he loved and cared for me so much – because I was a blood relative. I called my adopted mother Mama. She took good care of me, but I never really felt loved by her. It was more my sister Virginia who was like a mom to me. I also had my brothers Alec, Fabian, and Melvin. Melvin was actually Virginia's son, but my parents brought him up. They all saw me as their sister, and I always considered them my brothers and sister too. But like I said, Virginia was actually more of a mom to me than a sister. She meant the world to me.

All the houses in my family were along that same old road. That's why the area is called Morrisseau Village. The big house where I grew up had two storeys. The outside was done in imitation brick. It had a big living room and grey linoleum floors. I remember I used to wax it and shine it all the time. It had wide stairs, and the whole second floor was just one big room. There was one partition down the middle of the room, and there were closets on either side. For the most part, we all slept up there, although there was a bedroom downstairs as well.

When I was young, we had a store in the house. I don't know how big the store was, but it couldn't have been that big. There were shelves in that big living room area, and I remember a counter with a cash register on it. I also remember a big bag of sugar with a little shovel in it. When someone came to buy some sugar, you had to scoop it into in a brown paper bag and weigh it. I'm thinking they sold sugar by the pound. There were also these big, see-through bowls filled with candy. But we never touched that candy.

I learned years later that my papa and his brother Albert owned the store and ran it together for quite some time. Then his brother started drinking too much and was drinking up the money, so my papa just let the store go. "Let him have it," he said. He gave his brother the store and it went down.

One of my earliest memories occurred around the time the store was closing. It came to me in a flashback. I remember seeing empty shelves. I understand that this happened in 1948, so I must have been about five or six years old. A lightning bolt ran straight through our house. I was standing on the main floor when I heard a very loud noise with lots of banging. I remember crying because I was so scared. I heard glass smashing, and looking to my right, I saw that window was smashed. There was nothing left. Apparently, that's where the lightning travelled through. I saw a baby on a

baby swing, alone in that room. To this day I don't know who that baby was. This happened on a Sunday while my parents were in church, so no one else was around. After that, there were a lot of people that came there to see what happened. Even news people came to report on what had happened.

Around the time I started school, when I was about seven years old, my hair was split down the middle and was always combed back into braids. I guess I didn't like my hair split down the middle like that, so one day I decided to cut my hair myself. I cut the front part, so they had to cut it short to straighten my hair out. I had bangs after that and it looked better. My mama always made sure I was dressed well. It was important for me to dress nice and to have nice clothes, so that people could see that she was doing a good job looking after me. I remember I was always wearing dresses. When I went to school, I always had a good dress. My mama would get used clothing from the richer people in town and make things for me. I used to wear these black tunics with a white blouse underneath. It had a belt around the middle and a pleated skirt. I'd always wear these to school. I remember I had white and navy-blue shoes with laces. One year I had a zipper on my shoes, and I really liked those. I thought, "Oh man, I'm in style!" When I was about twelve years old, I had penny loafers. I bought my own stuff once I was able to work, but up until that point my mama always made sure I was dressed well.

My mama also used to take apart old jackets with a blade and cut them in squares to make blankets. There was this one time she made me a nice coat out of those old jackets. I remember that it was green and that she ripped it on the other side to make it look like a new jacket. She put buttons on it with a collar. It was so nice. She sewed it all herself with her old sewing machine. Those are the good memories,

the ones that remind me of what she did for me. I learned how to be a good housekeeper from my mama, and I also learned to sew, cook, and clean by copying her. She was a good role model in that way.

My mama was a fair-skinned Scottish lady, but because of how long her family had lived in the community, she mostly talked Ojibway and some broken English. I remember that she had red hair before it turned grey. It was really long and copper-toned just like her dad's. When she was a young girl, her mother passed away, and her dad remarried this Native woman. Apparently, this woman was very, very mean to them. My mama worked really hard but was always being called down by her stepmom. She never received any love or hugs. She often talked about that and how they'd eat crumbs and leftovers off the table. So I came to understand why my mama was the way she was with me.

One hot summer day, when I was about five or six years old, I was playing outside while my mama was in the kitchen visiting with her friend. I hurt my foot and wanted comfort. I went crying to my mama.

My mama told me, "Go cry outside." But I sat under the table to be near her. I wanted her to look at my boo-boo, but she wouldn't. She ignored me, telling her friend in her Ojibway language, "She's a really bad and stubborn little girl."

All I ever wanted was her love. It was her saying that I was a bad kid that hurt more than anything. I cried more because she hurt my feelings, and not so much about the boo-boo on my foot. I remember so vividly how I felt at that moment. It was something that impacted me throughout my life. I always wanted my mama to love me, and I never felt that she did.

I would often see her showing love to my brother, Fabian. I thought that he was my real brother, before I found out I was adopted. I never understood what the difference was. I couldn't understand why she loved him and not me. When

I would see her showing love for him, I always wished that she would do that for me.

I don't remember very much about what Fabian was like when he was a kid. Like most brothers though, he could be kind of mean. Once we were playing outside together and he convinced me to go horseback riding. I was about seven at the time. We used the stairs by the wash line, and he sort of lifted me onto the horse's back. Then he slapped the horse and it reared, knocking me right off. Fabian was just laughing at me. My papa gave him heck for that.

Fabian had chores to do, like the rest of us. He was supposed to clean the barn, to take the manure and shovel it out. My papa used to get after him because he wouldn't listen. There was this one time when my papa came home and found that Fabian had been cooking for himself. He was eating in the kitchen when my papa came in. When my papa saw him there, he scolded him, "You know you were supposed to do your chores first before you did anything else." My papa would say things like that, but my mama always took up for Fabian. He used to get away with all kinds of things because of that.

Once, when I was about eight or nine years old, my brother Fabian and I were climbing on the roof of the barn. Our mama told us to get down. She threw something in our direction to get our attention. I think it was a stick. She hit my brother's leg by accident. He cried and came down. She cuddled and comforted him. I remember thinking, "I wish she would do that for me." I always wished that she would hold me.

She would sometimes give me really good lickings. I remember her telling someone how she used to get beatings from her mother too. I think that's probably why she treated me that way. Hitting someone was like a normal thing. It was normalized for me too. Still, I desperately wanted her to show me love and affection. I always tried to please her.

Nobody ever actually told me that I was adopted. I found out when I overheard my mama talking about it to one of her friends. She was telling them about the day they came to get us after my mother died. I felt confused and curious about what had happened, but it wasn't until I was much older that I asked any questions. Even then, it was my sister Virginia and my sister-in-law Annie that I spoke to. Annie was Alec's wife. They lived nearby, and I had a really good relationship with her. I was never able to talk with my mama the way I could with Virg or Annie.

After hearing that I was adopted, I finally began to understand why I always felt a deep loneliness. When I used to play with my friends Mimi and Bugsy, I would watch how their mother was with them and wonder. I loved their relationship with their mother and how she nurtured them. I used to ask myself, "I wonder what it feels like?" I felt a kind of loneliness because my mama wasn't my real mother, and I think I always had a sense of it, even before I knew. I always felt there was something missing in my life, and that's what it was I guess – a real mother.

Even if she wasn't my real mother, I still sought motherly love and affection from her. I wanted her approval and I always tried to please her. I was like that for the longest time with others too. I was always trying to please people. I now understand my own behaviours, where they came from and why I was the way I was, because of my understanding of human behaviour and trauma.

I never really had any bad feelings towards my mama for the way she treated me. I never blamed her. As I mentioned before, I believed that all of this was normal. Later, I came to understand it further when I learned about her upbringing, and I could empathize with her. So I don't hold anything against her. She did the best she could, even by just taking me in. I've learned to forgive.

My papa was different from my mama. I always felt loved by him, even though he never hugged me, held me, or even told me that he loved me. I just knew he loved me. My papa was a good man. I learned a lot of things by watching him and the way he lived. He was very generous and never expected anything in return. He was so kind to everyone. These things stay with you when you see them as a child. I share these things with clients that I work with, because it is so important for parents to know that their children are watching and learning from them all the time. To this day I try to be like my papa.

My papa was a slim, serious man. He always seemed to be concentrating, no matter what he was doing. Respect was very important to him. He didn't let us take large portions at meals. He would always say that people are hungry and that it was wrong to waste food. If we were still hungry when we had finished, then we could take more. He never talked when he ate, and I remember he even used to close his eyes when he ate, appreciating every bite.

My papa worked hard to provide for his family. He was a carpenter who used to build houses in the community during the summer. His main job, however, was that of a maintenance man at one of the schools. I'm not exactly sure which one. When he went off to work, he wore these grey striped coveralls. In the summertime I used to pick strawberries for him while he was at work in the morning. I would pick just enough for his dessert when he came home for lunch, mashing the berries and putting it on his bread or bannock.

One winter day, I was home with my sister Virginia, and I was sick. I don't know what was wrong with me, but I wasn't eating. She put some tomatoes and crackers in a bowl to have me try to eat something, but I just couldn't eat. So she got me ready to go to the Indian hospital in Pine Falls. She helped me put on my ski pants and did up the straps. The next thing

I remember is her carrying me to the car and her friend driving me to Pine Falls. We met my papa in front of the pool room and the barber shop with a blue, white, and red globe turning and spinning.

My papa took me to the old Indian hospital. I have memories of being there. It was very lonely, but I remember this one nurse who was very kind to me. I liked it when she was working. There was also a cleaning lady who used to give me an orange or sometimes an apple and would speak to me in Ojibway, telling me, “Don’t let anyone see you eat it.”

They were kind to me there, but I wasn’t happy. I guess I used to cry by the window, watching and waiting for my papa to come and get me.

Then one day, as I was standing on the bed and watching for my papa to walk down the street, he came. He finally came to pick me up! I don’t know how long I was there, only that it felt like a very long time. He brought a new dress for me when he came to pick me up. It was white with red strawberries and a red belt. I was so happy. I never needed my papa to hug me or to hold me and say, “I love you,” because I always felt his love. I felt it in moments like this and in the lessons he taught me.

I have special memories of my papa coming home late on winter evenings and telling us stories. My brother Fabian and I would lay on the floor on either side of him by the coal burning Booker stove. This was before we had electricity. My papa would tell us these stories about Nanabozho. I remember that some of these stories were so long, and I would fall asleep listening to them. It’s interesting that many of my childhood memories have been blocked out or have faded with time, yet I can still feel the warmth of that stove and the love of my papa as he told those traditional stories. The lessons I learned from them and from watching my papa have always stayed with me. They walk with me still because they

have helped shape the person I am today and have sustained me through some impossibly difficult experiences.

I have some vague memories of Christmas as a child. I used to help my mama and Virg make Christmas pudding every year. To make that steam pudding they would mix up the ingredients and put it into these white sacks. Then they'd boil them for three hours. That was so awesome. The smell was amazing. I still make my Christmas pudding that way. It's a family tradition.

Once, when I was almost eight years old, my mama and papa took me to Winnipeg to go Christmas shopping. It was very early and my sister Virginia was still in bed when we left. As I was getting ready to go, she said in Ojibway, "Remind Papa to buy the record by Hank Williams. It's called *Weary Blues from Waitin'*." My brother Fabian also wanted a record by Hank Williams, but I can't remember the song. We used to have this big wooden record player. It was tall and had wooden legs on it, and you'd have to wind it up to play the records. I have nice memories of that. I think I forgot to tell my papa though. It was still dark out when my parents and I left to catch the bus to Winnipeg.

There were lots of Christmas lights in the city. We went into one store with squeaking floorboards. I don't remember what store it was though. My parents bought me a pair of winter boots that laced up and had fur around the edges. I just loved my new boots. It was such an exciting day. When we were coming home on the bus, my papa said, "Look, Diane." He was pointing to a red neon light in the shape of a man hitting something with an axe. The store was named Man with an Axe because they axed and lowered the prices. I don't remember getting home from this trip, but I do remember just how special it was.

As kids, my siblings and I had a lot of work to do, but we also had a lot of freedom. Most of our free time was spent

outside. In the summer we used to take these big pails filled with water, and we used to go into the fields and fill the big gopher holes with water. The gopher would come up for air in different places. As kids we used to do that. We used to have a lot of fun playing.

Back then the river was clear and there were no weeds. Not like today. It was really nice. Sometimes, we'd spend the whole day swimming in that river. I also remember us swimming down there while Virg and my sister-in-law Annie would wash the clothes. They would have a fire going, and when they finished, we'd help them carry up the baskets to the line where they hung the clothes. When the weather wasn't so nice all the washing was done using water collected in these two big rain barrels that we kept by the house.

In the wintertime there used to be these big wide snow drifts. We used to make tunnels in them down by the bank where we lived. We never knew that those things could collapse. We didn't really think about danger at all back then. I loved to skate too. When the river froze it was clear and smooth, and I would be skating all the time. I would skate nearly all day until dark. I used to skate right across the river. Boy! I used to love skating. There were times when I was with other kids, but most of the time I was out there alone. No one ever talked to me about being by myself or asked me where I was. I could have fallen through the ice and drowned, but I was trusted to make good decisions on my own. We were taught lessons about respect, about nature and safety, through stories and observation. There was one area by the church where the river never really froze. It was always open water. It was a good thing I didn't skate over there. The thing is, I never had to be told not to skate there. I knew it wasn't safe. We all took risks, but somehow, we knew when a line shouldn't be crossed. There is a lot of research out there now on the benefits of risky play and

independence for children. Some people might think we were being neglected, but I don't think so. There is wisdom in giving kids freedom to take risks and to make mistakes. And we weren't without limits or expectations. Especially when it came to respecting others, my parents were strict.

There used to be a band hall in Sagkeeng that some of us kids would play in. We were playing there this one time, teasing this man, Frank, who had a developmental delay. We weren't really being mean though. He was like a friend. He was just laughing along with us as we were teasing him. There was a man looking after the hall at the time. He came over and told us to keep quiet. He told Frank to keep quiet too. Frank became upset with that and grabbed him on the shoulder and shook him. He was harmless, but I know that man got really scared.

He was furious at all of us for that. So you know what he did? He told my papa that I swore at him and used the four-letter word. I never swore in those days. I think I must have been about eight years old, and the others and I were just kids being kids. We were having fun playing tag and everything. We weren't really doing anything wrong or being mean, just playing around. I can honestly say that I would never have sworn at an adult back then. Still, that's what he told my papa, and my papa believed him.

I was grounded for a week. I couldn't do anything. After I would eat my supper and do the dishes and all my chores, I had to go upstairs and stay there. This was during the summertime, and it would be daylight up until ten o'clock at night. I would hear and watch other kids playing baseball and all of that from the window upstairs. When there was about one day left in my punishment, I asked my papa, "Can I go play outside now?" He told me, "If you ask me again, you'll stay here for another week." So I never dared ask again.

That's how my papa was. We never talked back or questioned him. I never talked back to him no matter what. I know it was love though. I have good memories of my papa because I knew that he loved me.

My parents never went to school and neither of them could read or write. My papa could sign his name though, and he taught my mama how to sign hers too. And even though we were poor, they always provided for us. We never went hungry. We ate so well back then. There was always good, fresh food, and my mama and Virg were really good cooks. I would look forward to lunch and supper coming home from school, especially when Virg was home. You could just smell her cooking coming through the door, making your mouth water. I think that's why I like cooking and baking to this day. The smell of Virg's cooking.

We had a big field of potatoes. I would get so excited when it was time to pick the potatoes. My papa would use the plow to turn the earth, and you'd see all these potatoes. Then we'd pick them and haul them back to the house. We had a big cellar where we kept our potatoes and other vegetables. Our vegetable garden was at the back of the house. I can still taste all the fresh vegetables we grew: corn, tomatoes, cucumber, radishes, and red beets. It was my job to help work in the garden and clean out the weeds. I used to like picking tomatoes and cucumbers, and I would help clean the peas. I loved being in the garden.

Along with working together in our garden, we used to go blueberry picking. It was something we did as a family. These are fond memories. There were lots of berries to pick in those days. It's not like today. You don't see many berry stands in Sagkeeng anymore, but there used to be a lot. There was this big field where we always used to pick berries. A highway goes through it now, and there are houses all around. There is still a small field still by the treatment

centre, but back then there were no buildings at all there; just strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and cranberries, all over. It's not surprising, then, that we had all kinds of jam all the time.

There was always plenty of meat as well. We had a barn and raised pigs, cows, and chickens. I remember going into the barn to collect the eggs. We used to eat chicken soup, or sometimes salt pork with white beans and bannock or loaf bread. It wasn't just farm animals though. My papa would hunt and trap as well. When the men would go hunting, they would always share the food. They knew who needed help. I remember this one woman, a single mother who had a few kids. My brother Fabian and my papa would take her deer meat and fish. My papa made his own boat, and he had lots of nets. I used to love eating fish the way my sister made it. She would boil the fish and serve it with potatoes and raw onion from the garden.

I have a distinct memory of my papa and Fabian coming home one day with a deer. I used to love the smell of Virg frying up that deer meat. She'd also cook up rabbits that my papa would bring home. She'd fry the meat with potatoes and onions. She always served it with fresh bannock too. I remember her taking off the cover and the steam just coming off it. My favourite part of the rabbit was the ribs. I would lick them just like a cat to savour the flavour after I'd finished.

There used to be a lot of water in that creek where we lived. It was deep and so dark. My papa used to put muskrat traps there. We used to bake and eat muskrats. They were so good. I used to like them. He just cleaned them, skinned them, and put them in the big oven. After you gut them, they look small, but they're good for you. My papa told us that they were healthy to eat because they eat stuff down under the water, like wee-kay (wild ginger). That's a medicine, wee-kay. It grows underwater and people pick it to help with things

like colds and sore throats. So it's healthy to eat muskrat because they carry those medicines.

With both my parents working and our family growing most of our own food, we were able to afford certain things that a lot of others in the community couldn't. We were one of the first families in Sagkeeng to have a television set. It was a little black and white television, which was kind of snowy sometimes. There were only about maybe three families on the reserve that could afford to have a car, a telephone, and a television during this period. People used to come to our house to watch wrestling. They would come and set up their chairs in the living room, and we had to make room. We couldn't sit down. We always gave our neighbours a chair to sit down and watch television. It was like a movie theatre, and everyone was welcome.

My papa even had a car. I remember that it was black and square. I think it was a 1949 model. There were times when the roads would be really muddy after a rain, because there were no gravel or paved roads on the reserve at the time. Cars could easily get stuck, and it happened all the time. My papa gave a lot of rides to people in that car. One day, this woman asked him to take her to town. She wanted to give him a dollar, which was a lot of money those days. My papa wouldn't take the dollar.

He told the woman, "No, I don't need it right now. If I need it, I will take it. You have children to feed." This was all said in Ojibway. In those days everyone spoke the Ojibway language. He was so generous and always giving, never expecting anything in return. I learned these lessons in generosity from my papa, and I always try to follow them to this day.

That was how Sagkeeng was back then. It was a real Ojibway-Anishinabe community. Come harvest time, all the neighbours would get together to help each other out. They

used horse-drawn plows to cut the hay and pitchforks to pile it up. We would make bannock sandwiches and bring them to the fields. Everyone would stop to eat them and drink cold tea with milk. There was this one man who used to help my papa with the hay. After he passed away, my papa would share potatoes, deer meat, and moose meat with his widow; whatever we had, he would share with her. He also shared with others – anyone who needed help, he was there. That’s just how it was back then. People took care of one another.

One time my little nephew, Alec’s son, came over and wanted to help clean Kokum’s garden. He was about three years old at the time. He just went in and cut all the corn down. It was only about three feet high, not at all ready. The grown-ups couldn’t get mad though; he was trying to help. I remember them all laughing. He was only three, but already he was learning that value of helping others. It was an important part of who we were as a family, and as a community back then.

My sister Virginia was so important to me. There were happy times whenever she was home. She took good care of me. My sister Virginia was like a mom to me. Virg and I were always laughing and playing together. People tell me I used to like laughing. My sister used to say that I had a “sexy laugh.” I didn’t really know what that meant because I was too young. What I think she really meant, though, was that my laugh sounded good. It was a happy sound.

I was happy when we were together, but sometimes she would be gone for weeks, or months, and I remember being so lonely without her.

There was this one time she was gone for a long time. I think I was around seven or so, and I remember sitting by the window waiting for her. She was in the sanatorium because she had gotten sick with tuberculosis. Finally, she came home, but I didn’t know if she was on leave for a visit or back for

good. Years later, I found out that my papa had taken her out and was doctoring her himself with Anishinabe medicine. He made a drink to treat the tuberculosis. He would boil that medicine on our cookstove and put it in those big jars called sealers. Then he had my sister drink it like a tea every day until she was better.

Then one day the RCMP came dressed in uniform. They used to wear those black pants when they came onto the reserve. They came looking for my sister. I was so afraid that they would find her and take her away again, and of course they did. They took her back to the sanatorium because they thought she was still sick. I guess the medicine my papa made had really helped her though, and she was better, so they brought her home. Before long she started gaining weight back. After that she was herself again.

One of the family's pastimes in the evenings was playing cards. We had this big, round old-fashioned table. It looked like a pedestal to me. One evening, not long after Virg had recovered, I was sitting under that table while the rest of the family played cards. I think I was crying because I knew there was a guy waiting for my sister. I never liked that guy. I felt threatened by him because I was afraid that he would take my sister away again. I knew that she was going to leave just like the last time, and it broke my heart. I remember looking out the window as they left together and my papa telling me in Ojibway, "She's going to be back, but not right away." She left with her boyfriend, and they went to live in Red Lake, Ontario. Eventually she did come back, but by that time, she had two little boys. I felt a deep sadness when she left. I guess I must have been grieving, which I recognize now because I've grieved many losses in my life since.

My sister taught me a lot when she was home. I was about ten or eleven years old when I started to learn how to make bannock by watching my sister Virginia make it. I would

come home from school at lunchtime, and it was mainly my sister who would make me lunch. Often, she would make soup, which was delicious, but I loved it best when she cooked rabbit in the frying pan. We had fresh bannock all the time, which she cooked using an old wood stove. It felt so good when she was home. It was a real home then. Our place was always clean, and she cooked nice meals. There was always soup and bannock in the house when she was home. I knew that she loved me, and when she left, I had to learn to survive on my own. She taught me how to cook and clean at an early age. I was determined to learn. I had to learn!

My sister-in-law Annie was there for me, too, and she taught me other important skills when Virginia wasn't there. She also made bannock and loaf bread really well. I remember when I first tried making loaf bread, it would always go flat. My papa told me once, "Diane, stop spoiling that flour and just make bannock." I didn't give up though. The next time I tried to make bread and it didn't turn out right, I hid a bunch of that dough outside so my papa wouldn't see!

I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong. Annie was the one who pointed out the problem. I guess I had used hot water, and that cooked the yeast too early. She taught me, "Everything has to be lukewarm. The water and oil have to be lukewarm so that the yeast doesn't cook right away. That's why your bread doesn't rise." Finally, I was able to make loaf bread! It was nice. I learned to be domestic. It's not like today because now everything is so easy. You can buy just about anything already made and hardly have to lift a finger.

You know, I thought it was normal to be called lazy. It didn't matter what I did or how hard I worked; this was how my mama saw me. I remember working hard at the things I learned. By the time I was twelve years old I was hauling water, washing, and scrubbing the floors and clothes all day. My mama and papa worked in town, so I was also expected

to make supper. I would often make soup and bannock. I worked hard but it was never enough. I didn't realize or know that it wasn't like this for most people. I thought it was normal.

It was my sister-in-law who brought it to my attention many years later. She told me, "I felt sorry for you." When Annie used to come over to use the phone or visit, she would see me working in the house. She said, "You worked hard all day. I saw you hauling water, hanging clothes, and then ironing clothes after you cleaned up the house. And then I would hear your mama calling you lazy because you forgot to wash the little boys' faces." She would get really upset about that kind of thing. I realized then that maybe the way I was treated wasn't normal. Still, I never felt any resentment towards my mama. She did the best she could, and maybe she thought this was normal too. I found forgiveness for her.

I had to work hard growing up, but so did my parents, and I was well provided for as a young child. I was dressed in the best clothes my family could afford. I had good food to eat. I had a father who loved me and protected me. I learned these lessons about how to work hard and how to treat others from my mama and papa. I might have lacked motherly love and affection at the time, but I truly thought that this was normal. In fact, I thought I came from a relatively perfect home.

I can remember a lot of good things about my childhood. But there were some horrible things happening around me and to me during this time. Things that for the most part, I blocked out. I have no real memory of some things. There are clues, signs, and certain behaviours I had that hinted at the truth, but for years I could not see or understand them. Memories hidden in the protective shadows of the mind are still memories, still have an impact on your inner thoughts

and feelings, on your actions and decisions. This was my experience.

When I began my healing journey, I started looking into my past to try and understand what happened to me. One of the more disturbing things I learned is that one of the people who looked after me before I was adopted by my mama and papa was a pedophile. I'm not sure how many days or weeks I was fostered in this home. I think that it is very likely my first experience with abuse happened there, when I was just an infant. I've been having flashbacks of something happening to me as a baby. In one of these flashbacks, I see a big figure standing over me. I was crying and kicking. I don't know what happened. Maybe I'm not ready for this one specific memory. Maybe it's just too much.

My first flashbacks started a long time ago, after my sister Virginia shared some things from our childhood with me. She really helped me through the hard times in my life. I shared a lot with Virginia when she'd come and visit through the years. She would share some of her memories and experiences with me as well. We would just sit and talk for hours. There was this one time when we were talking about my husband Edgar, and the conversation turned to our childhood.

Edgar was very jealous and would often accuse me of being with other men before him. I said to Virg, "You know, it's strange: I never, ever went to bed with another guy before him, but somehow, I know I wasn't a virgin either. That's why he used to always beat me up. He knew I wasn't a virgin. Maybe that's why he treated me that way," I added.

She looked at me funny then, and I asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Maybe something happened to you as a kid."

"Yeah, maybe," I said.

Virg said, "Something happened to me too. That's why I put myself in school."

I was somewhat surprised to hear this. “I didn’t even know you were in residential school,” I told her.

“Yeah. I left home because of it. Mama never listened to me, and that’s why I put myself in school.” She went on, “I thought it was just me, but it might have happened to you too.”

Virg thought she saw something being done to me. She told me that one day she went upstairs, and she saw a man walking away from one of the beds zipping up his pants. She said there was a little girl lying on the bed that he was walking away from. I was the only little girl in the house at the time, so it had to be me. She was vague about it when she told me. She probably knew more, but maybe she didn’t think I could handle it. I started having flashbacks after my sister shared this stuff with me. In this one flashback I saw someone over me. He was wiping my legs. I had blood all over them. I could see that I had little shoes on. I was so small and scared. My body felt sick. I threw up after seeing that.

I don't know who abused me. There were always men coming and going in and out of our house; like this one guy, who would come and just watch me as I was cleaning the house. He had a reputation. He used to show kids his privates.

Then there was another man who was caught molesting a young girl many years later. I have one memory of when I was about seven or eight years old, maybe. This man showed some of us kids his privates, and he was trying to lie on top of me. Two other men were there too. These guys all used to be in the residential school, and I think that they were probably abused there too. Where else would they have learned that? I got away and I tried to tell my mama what they were doing. She called me a liar and she wouldn’t believe me. So I knew I could never tell her anything after that. Virginia understood how I felt. She never felt heard and was

never believed either. For the longest time we both thought our mama knew what was happening but didn't care.

Virg told me about the time she realized I was probably being abused too. "Mama brought you to the school one time to come and visit me. You were limping, walking funny, and I asked Mama what was wrong with you. She didn't say, but I knew something was wrong with your private area."

"I wonder if she took me to the hospital?" I asked.

"I don't think so."

There were signs of abuse, which nobody saw or wanted to see. Maybe they just didn't know what to do. I remember wanting to masturbate as a very young child. I have one memory of looking for something to use, to put inside me. Obviously, somebody taught me that, but I don't know who. I was only a little girl, but I knew things about sex. I understand where those ideas came from now.

I also remember a time when I was about seven years old, and our cousins came to visit. They lived in the white community, and they spoke only English. I didn't know how to speak English, but we still played together. This one time, I was playing sex with my cousin, and my mama walked into the room and caught us playing. I don't know where my papa was when that happened. Probably at work. Anyway, it was my mama that saw us, and it was my mama that punished me. I got a really good strapping. I thought she was never going to stop hitting me and that I was going to die. I remember that. I remember sitting on the wooden boards of the second floor of our house. I remember just sitting there, looking at my legs, and they were just so swollen from the gum rubber she used to strap me. She called me a dirty little girl in Ojibway. I still remember that. I was crying. It's like a dream.

I think when my mama beat me that day, she might have cured me of thinking that way because I don't think I ever

did anything like that ever again. Sometimes I think maybe it was a good thing my mama half killed me because, who knows, I might have become a perpetrator too. Professionals in the area point out that those who were abused might abuse others as well. They say you can become one, do things to others that happened to you. I'm thankful that nothing like that ever happened to me. I never thought that way. Looking back, I thought that in some ways she helped me, because it showed me that what was done to me wasn't normal – that it was wrong. But by ignoring my cries for help and beating me, she really hurt me. I felt alone and ashamed.

Having Virg made me feel less alone, and it had such a profound impact on me and my healing journey when she told me about what happened to her. It was many years later before we were able to talk openly like this, but I can only imagine the good it would have done if someone had noticed, believed me, and helped me back then. Children need to be heard, to know that they are not alone. This is why I feel it's important that I share my story, even these parts that are hard to face. It is painful to talk about, and I know it will make people uncomfortable. Maybe this is why so many parents and caregivers react the way my mama did when I tried to tell her what happened to me – the truth is so terrible, the discomfort so great, that they close themselves off to the possibility. It is understandable, but in doing this they close themselves off from the child and what they are experiencing. The child is left to suffer in silence and shame. That was my experience, and it was years into my adulthood before I felt safe enough to start facing what happened to me. I couldn't have done it alone. Having one trusted adult can make all the difference. That's one thing I want people to take from my story: to have the courage to believe kids and be there for them, help them, even when it is hard and scary.

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UBC Press is a Benetech Global Certified Accessible™ publisher. The epub version of this book meets stringent accessibility standards, ensuring it is available to people with diverse needs.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: One second at a time : my story of pain and reclamation / Diane Morrisseau, with Elisabeth Brannigan ; foreword by Marlyn Bennett.

Names: Morrisseau, Diane, author. | Brannigan, Elisabeth, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230620191 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230620299 | ISBN 9780774880978 (softcover) | ISBN 9780774880992 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774880985 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Morrisseau, Diane. | LCSH: Abused wives—Canada—Biography. | LCSH: Victims of family violence—Canada—Biography. | LCSH: Family violence—Canada. | LCSH: Women—Abuse of—Canada. | LCSH: Women—Violence against—Canada. | LCGFT: Autobiographies.

Classification: LCC HV6626.23.C3 M67 2024 | DDC 362.82/92092—dc23



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

Canada



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ARTS COUNCIL



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UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

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Purich Books, an imprint of UBC Press
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC

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