



BEATRICE

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L'auteure, directrice de la clinique du Mont Carmel à Winnipeg, raconte l'histoire de Béatrice, une femme autochtone à qui la Société de l'aide à l'enfance a enlevé les enfants. Béatrice, comme la majorité des femmes autochtones molestées, était muette et effrayée de tenir tête à l' "homme blanc".

Beatrice sat on the only comfortable chair, staring into space, her face a mask of abject misery. Her eyes were red from crying and a sleepless night. Her back ached unbearably — she was due to deliver her third child any day.

She went over the events of the previous day. Her mind was in a jumble — places, moods, and memories. How and why did this happen? Where did she and Ed go wrong? She had come home yesterday at about four o'clock to be sure to be home to greet her children — Tammy, who was seven, and ten-year-old Arnold. But they were not there. Instead there was a note on the door advising her to call the Children's Aid.

Her heart started to pound like a hammer, her palms were sweaty. She felt faint. The door, which was always sticking, wouldn't open. She stood there with helpless tears coursing down her cheeks. She tugged and kicked hard and the door suddenly gave way. She rushed to the phone, dialled the number and waited, fear clutching at her heart, her head abuzz with premonition. Finally a social worker came to the phone. Yes, the children had been picked up. They were in the hospital being examined.

"Can I go and see them, please?" she asked breathlessly. The answer was a firm no. She could see them tomorrow.

She hung up the phone. As usual, authority frightened her. She knew that she should have insisted, maybe argued. But she remained mute — beaten. She didn't even ask why they were there.

Then she remembered. Arnold was picking on his sister. Tammy, as usual, screamed like a banshee.

Ever since Ed had lost his job, the children seemed to do everything that got on their nerves. No matter, children should be given love and understanding — but sometimes your own problems are so overwhelming that it isn't possible. That was no excuse, she knew that. But she was so tired, so very tired.

She tried to remember what happened. Ed had been out all day looking for work and came home empty-handed. He looked grim, his face ashen. Not a word was said. After their meager supper he sat down to watch TV — his only escape from the reality of their broken dreams, their plans. If only he had continued with his construction job which paid real good! But — building was at a standstill.

Tammy's screams became piercing. Ed got up heavily, his face set with anger and frustration, walked into the children's room, and smacked Arnold hard. How his hand landed on his cheek, which swelled immediately, he did not know. He stood looking at the boy, all his anger gone. Arnold looked at his father, holding his cheek, then started to scream — "I hate you, I hate you."

Neither of them had ever heard him react to punishment that vehemently, and he had been punished frequently lately. She got up heavily and managed to quiet him down and put cold compresses on until he fell asleep.

In the morning his cheek was black and blue. She thought of keeping him home but figured that he would be better off at school. It never occurred to her that her children would be picked up, just like that.

Once again, a sense of futility and helplessness engulfed her. She started to shake uncontrollably. This frightened her. What if she started to go into labour? She was all alone. The piercing ring of the telephone invaded her dark thoughts. She got up slowly, holding her back with both hands, trying to allay the relentless pain. She picked up the phone.

It was Jennifer, her oldest sister, who knew everything that went on among the nine sisters and their families. She was already acquainted with the fact that Children's Aid had taken away her children.

"Well, what are you going to do?" She was always at loggerheads with agencies, police, and neighbours, especially after a few drinks. Since she was under the "influence of" most of the time, her pugnaciousness was augmented and she was ready to do battle.

"Have you got a lawyer? Are you going to let them get away with that —?"

"Jen, you know we have no money to pay a lawyer."

"So, big deal, go to free legal aid; you're entitled." She was full of advice. Warily Beatrice hung up the phone after listening to a tirade against the Children's Aid.

"We have to stand up for our rights," admonished Jennifer. "Just because we are Indian, they can't step on us."

Beatrice sat down heavily, too tired to do anything but sit and stare into space. Somehow she couldn't

fight for herself, even when her children were "in trouble." Officials frightened her, and she sat and stared mute, gazing at the floor when spoken to — she couldn't find the words like her oldest sister.

Fear gripped her and held her. All evening and way into the night she just sat and did nothing, like so many of her race — silence seemed to be their defence but also their downfall.

Being native, she couldn't stand up to those social workers and officials who were so sure of themselves. Her husband had long ago gone to bed, but she sat like a stone, unable to move, just sat and remained silent. She continued to sit and look vacantly into space. She felt beaten. Despite her outward calm, there was turmoil within her.

So she sat, numb, confused, taut, waiting for the morning to come.

Yes, Beatrice was native. She represented the majority of native women who remain mute when they are abused and frightened to buck the "white system."

Native women remain silent when abused by their husbands, fathers, and boyfriends. That is why some of them erupt every now and again inappropriately and hit out against officials, sometimes with tragic results. Drinking excessively is one of the methods they use to lessen the pain.

In Manitoba the Children's Aid apprehends native children more often than white. In fact, it is claimed that the majority of children under their care are native. Native women are not only oppressed, but, as is well known, they lose their treaty rights when they marry white men. They are kept in dismal ignorance of their rights as human beings.

But these women are waking up to the fact that they are human beings and have rights. Here and there leaders spring up; movements for the betterment of their lot have developed. Many are taking advantage of education through upgrading and are going into various professions such as teaching and nursing. They are learning to stand up for themselves by leaving the husbands who abuse them.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for a woman to study when she has five or six children. Too many give up their studies because their families need them. Unfortunately, far too many resort to excessive drinking and pill popping. Their children run around dirty, unkempt, foraging for food.

Recently there was quite a hubbub about native children lining up for food at the "Sally Ann." The media carried the story right across Canada. It still goes on.

Drink is the biggest single problem facing the Indian people. A close second is abject poverty rampant throughout Canada.

Since 1964 Anne Ross has been Executive Director of Mt. Carmel Clinic in Winnipeg; she does counselling, group therapy, and marriage guidance.