

QUIET AUNTIE

1965

There is so much to do on this one day away from home.

There are about 30,000 people who populate Souris. Compared to our farm, (population: 5), it may as well be New York City. We don't know that the "main drag" in Souris, which seems to go on forever, crossing the valley from the north hill to the south hill and lasting a few miles, is a pretty small deal as far as cities go. We are, literally, "right off the farm".

After wandering the mall and a stop at the photographers for Matsig's graduation pictures we have one more stop to make before starting the 70 mile trek home to the rez. That is, shopping and a late lunch at the Red Owl Grocery Store. There is no comparison between the rows upon rows of colorful food at Red Owl and the dismal, over priced country store that sits at the edge and on the white side of the reservation border. It keeps the bare minimum of stuff that is guaranteed to be, almost always, dry. White rice, beans, macaroni... There are dusty old cans of commodity foods, chopped meat, dried potatoes and gallons of peanut butter. (Indians pick up the free commodity foods and trade what they don't want for other stuff like shotgun shells, meat, fabric, liquor... What I don't yet realize, at my age, is that poor white people do this too, except they don't have to live on reservations.) If you are anywhere near the border of the rez you can forget about finding "fresh" anything. No oranges, carrots, lettuce or anything like that. It makes me sorry, for a moment, about some of my friends who almost never get off the rez.

But here we are and the Red Owl store is an explosion of color. Some of those foods are a complete mystery to me... including a little, furry brown thing with a funny name, "kiwi". But we are in a hurry

and the most important thing is that we get to order our lunch from a menu and eat and not have to clean up after ourselves.

Across from the peanut butter and jelly isle the grocery store ends and the lunch counter business begins. We seat ourselves on the backless stools. I remind myself that I am too old to spin like I did when I was little. Instead I make a discreet turn, taking every opportunity to face first one companion and then the other, Quiet Auntie on my left, Matsig on my right. Like my stool, I am right in the middle... in this case, of being a little kid and a sophisticate like my older cousin, Matsig, who I kind of idolize.

Aloof, the waitresses keep their backs to us most of the time, very busy in spite of the fact there are only two other stools with people occupying them. Their hair tucked into nets and topped with little green crowns, they present themselves in the usual crisp white uniforms with light green aprons framed in a ruffle and tied in back at the waist. My attention is drawn to the identical details of these uniforms and I am reminded of pictures of bridesmaids in the Sears Catalog that Matsig has cut out and keeps in a flowered box. Inwardly I smile my little joke that these are the bridesmaids of the sandwich world. I fail to notice their facial expression or the tension that seems to leach into the air around us as we gladly settle in and reach for menus.

Ordering at a lunch counter is an extravagance! I try to act as though this happens all the time in our very cosmopolitan lives but really, I am a little giddy inside with the thrill of “ordering” food that will be placed before me by a server instead of being “ordered” to hurry up and set the table. The novelty is a complete distraction

I am unaware of the two men striding by the many empty seats at the counter who glance our way and then turn back to take the seats right next to us. Loudly, their words, like dog bites, surprise and interrupt my happy little circumstances.

“God damn it. God damn Indians should stay on the god damn reservation. I can’t eat sitting next to a god damn squaw. Jesus Christ they should stay on the god damn reservation.”

Quiet Auntie’s back stiffens and she seems to examine all the chopped up parts of food in her bowl of soup. When no one reacts I am confused and wonder if I heard correctly. It is distressing to me but “my adult”, my quiet Auntie does not respond and so I follow her example and even assume that it must not have happened. And maybe it didn’t because it will never, ever be mentioned until now.

The food seems to have dried out now and tastes like bark. Leaving most of it on our plates Auntie looks at her watch, acting surprised at the time, she persuades us we must leave for home in case of a winter storm.