

Come Walk With Me

A MEMOIR

Beatrice Mosionier



Sample Pages

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Published by HighWater Press, an imprint of Portage & Main Press Ltd.

Portage & Main Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of Manitoba through the Department of Culture, Heritage, Tourism & Sport and the Manitoba Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPDIP) for our publishing activities.

09 10 11 12 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens
Cover and interior design by Relish Design Ltd.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Mosionier, Beatrice, 1949-
Come walk with me : a memoir / Beatrice Mosionier.

ISBN 978-1-55379-219-2

1. Mosionier, Beatrice, 1949-. 2. MÈtis women--Biography.
3. Authors, Canadian (English)--20th century--Biography.
I. Title.

PS8576.O783Z463 2009 C813'.54 C2009-905271-7

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have grown up with the word “Native” and have used it throughout this memoir to identify myself and others, rather than using more current terms.

In an effort to protect the privacy of those I write about I have changed some names.



**HIGHWATER
PRESS**

100-318 McDermot Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3A 0A2
www.pandmpress.com

Portage & Main Press

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TO MY FAMILIES,
WITH LOVE

Portage & Main Press

INTRODUCTION

IT IS SEPTEMBER 1984. I'm on stage at Kildonan Park, in Winnipeg, for the Canadian Women's Music and Cultural Festival. *In Search of April Raintree* has been published for 18 months; the school edition is to be published in December. I will be reading from a manuscript I've been working on, *Spirit of the White Bison*, and introducing my panel of singers and musicians, none of whom I know. As I wait to go to the mike, I'm thinking, "What am *I* doing up here?"

Earlier I had wondered if I should try humour for the introductions. But I'm not blessed with that talent. Jokes that fall flat would detract from the performances. So I decide on safe, straightforward, if boring, introductions. The performers' energy and music will liven things up.

As I get my cue, I walk over to the mike and begin to speak. The audience rises in a standing ovation. At first I want to turn to see who else came on stage. When I realize the recognition is for me, I'm shocked, then I'm overwhelmed by their generosity, but apprehensive of what they might expect. They don't know the real me. The posters for the festival describe me as "Beatrice Culleton, powerful Métis writer." I don't think I'm powerful. I'm a mouse.

I relish that standing ovation because I know that it will be the only one I'll ever get. *In Search of April Raintree* will be the only novel I'll ever

write. Had I known I would write a story that was already so meaningful to so many, maybe I would have lived my life differently.

One of the performers I introduce is Alanis Obomsawin, a singer from Montreal. After our session when she asks to interview me, I learn she is also a documentary film producer for the National Film Board. I want her to meet my mother and Alanis decides to interview her, as well.

The following week we three get together. First she interviews me and then I leave them so she can interview my mother privately. Because of my trepidation and my ignorance of technology, 18 years will pass before I hear that interview. By then I have come to realize that pieces of my life were missing and I needed to understand my mother's life. I had never asked Mom and Dad about their lives, for fear of making them relive painful memories; but Alanis's empathy and warmth made possible what I didn't dare try. So I have placed elements of this gift — my mother's story, as she told it to Alanis — at the beginning of each section of this memoir, as both a mirror to and context for my memories.

part one

Walking Alone

AUGUST 1949 TO
DECEMBER 1966

INTERVIEW PART ONE

I'M 72 YEARS OF AGE. I was born in 1912, on the 5th of July. In Camperville.

My mother, she was the Indian chief's daughter. Her name was Isabelle Napakitsit, Flatfoot, in English, eh. And my father, they said he was a Frenchman. Louis Pelletier was my father's name. But I don't know where he came from.

I didn't know my parents because when I was three months old, my mother died. And I was, uh . . . Mrs. Frances Ross took me after my mother died. She breastfed me and I stayed with them until I was two or three years old. Well, she was a Métis, but she married an Indian guy. And they brought me to that Indian school there, in Camperville. And the nuns took care of me, in that school. Sometimes it was, oh, that time. . . I'm alive now. But, oh, I took it, you know, because I was an orphan, and I didn't know any better.

Oh, I didn't even know my father. It was too far for him to come [visit]. He married another woman, after my mother died. So he had to stay home. One time, I, uh, I must have been about three years old. And it was just like a dream to me, when you're small, when you're two, three years old, it was just like a dream when I seen him.

I wasn't pure Indian. I wasn't supposed to stay there in the first place because I was a half-breed, eh. And they used to come and get me to work in the garden, to pull weeds. Oh, I don't know.

Sometimes, it was bad, and sometimes, just . . . just like that. I was only small, eh, when the nuns took care of me. And then from there they used to talk to me in English all the time.

There was lots of girls in there so we enjoyed ourselves. The girls, they learned me how to talk Saulteaux. When we were all by ourselves, eh, we speak in our language. But in front of the nuns, we had to speak in English. If we were caught speaking our language, sometimes we used to get the strap.

[Later] they sent me to Lebret, Saskatchewan. I liked it there better than the other one. Because if you do something bad, of course, you got punished for that. But if you don't do nothing bad, eh, you're okay. They won't punish you or nothing, for being good.

I stayed over there about three years, three, four years. When I was in Lebret, that's when my father died. I must have been 16 years old.

I was over 18 years and they send me back to Camperville. It's not like somebody that has been grown with their parents. When I come out of the convent, I didn't have nobody to fall back on, I had to go to work.

I had to stay with Mrs. Frances Ross. But they didn't treat me good. I had to, uh, I had to work hard. A lot of times when I was staying at Mrs. Frances Ross, I used to go out to the bush and cry in the bush, "Why did God take my mother away?" That's the way I used to cry.

But after, my sister took me. And then after that, my other sister Angele, she was in Camperville. That's the one who took me. And then after, my other sister come to get me from Winnipegosis. She was married to Jim Thompson. And I stayed with them a year, I guess. After that I started to work out. I always had a job to go to, all kinds of work. I always had a job waiting for me. If this job was finished, I had another one waiting for me. Well, you have to work. It doesn't matter wherever you are. You got to help, you know, help out. That's the way my life was all the time. I worked.

I went to Ste. Rose. And that's where I met my husband. He was living there. I must have been about 22. He must have been about 26. And then, well, we went around for about two years, eh, before we

got married. At McCreary in the Roman Catholic Church. Well, he was a good Red River jigger and he was a good violin player. He used to win first prize contests. Oh yeah. That's how I fell in love with him.

That's the time it was, uh, very tough times. That's the time Depression was on. We had to work hard for the farmers. Five dollar a month, that's all we got, and the government paid us the five. There was only one time I went to work at, uh, on the other side of Neepawa, Eden. That's the only place I got ten dollar a month. And I was working for the Chinaman's there. Not on a farm, in a hotel, like. And I got my room and board right in there.

Well my husband was cutting wood for a farmer out there, at the foot of the mountains. But I didn't work, me. We had a little shack, there. The guy that he was working for gave us a piece of land, to put our garden in. So we always had plenty of garden stuff. It's only meat and flour, sugar, tea that we had to buy.

I had my Kathy about a year, I guess, after we got married. Then I had Vivian, two years after that. Then, twice I had miscarriage. Yeah. We went back to Ste. Rose. There was no place to get money, lot of times my husband didn't work. Well, sometimes he would get a job from the farmers. And then after, we moved to Dauphin, when the war came. My husband used to work in the air force, in the . . . , at the [air base].

We had a little house of our own. We bought that little house. So that way, we got along okay. And we put money in the bank and we got along good. Cause I was working, washing clothes for the airmen. Sometimes my husband would bring ten bundles of clothes, eh. And I had to wash clothes, like this, on a board. Yeah. We save enough money to buy that little house.

That was, about three, four years, till the war was over. And then there was no work at the airport, eh. So my husband couldn't work. There were no more jobs. Then we had to move right into town. I used to get, like day work. And that's when my husband come into Winnipeg to look for a job. He couldn't find none. So, he left us over there. Uh, lots of times, we had, sometimes we didn't have any, hardly anything to eat.

And then, we come to Winnipeg. Vivian was six years old when I had my son, Edward. And three years after that, I had Beatrice. That was my last one. They both were born in St. Boniface Hospital.

I only had one room, for the whole bunch of us. Yeah, a little table, two chairs. We only had one bed, like that. My [older] two girls, they had to sleep on the floor. That's all the room we had.

And then my husband found a job at Pine Falls. That paper-mill company. So we moved down there for a while. But my husband couldn't keep a job very good. Oh yeah, he used to drink a lot. And he would leave us for a week, two weeks at a time. And sometimes, two months, three months. Yeah. So I had to look after my kids all by myself. But they gave me relief. The city of Winnipeg looked after us. I always got a job for day work. And then that's how I fed my kids.

I . . . he was kind of a flirty guy, my husband. He got after other women and I didn't like that, 'cause sometimes, he didn't support the kids. I didn't care about myself, but the kids, eh. And then after that, we got into arguments. And I started to drink. And then, that's the time he'd leave. And then, uh, that's when they took my kids.

Well, that landlady, she, uh, and my husband, he was after her all the time, eh. And she didn't like me, she wanted to kick me out on account of him, so I went out looking for another place. Here when I came back, they'd took the kids.

I didn't know what to do. I can't have my kids, I didn't want him around. I went to my cousin and I stayed with her. And that's when I started to drink heavy.

And we had to go to court. And when they told me I couldn't have my kids I burst out crying — right in the courtroom. I said if I had a gun I would have shot the whole damn works of them. That's how I felt.

Oh, my heart was torn into pieces. That's why today, I pity any mother if their kids were to be taken away like I had had.

— *MARY CLARA PELLETIER MOSIONIER*

CHAPTER 1

ME, SONNY — THAT’S MY OLDER BROTHER — Vivian, Kathy, Mommy, and Daddy, we live on Jarvis Street across from the train tracks. In the summertime, me, Sonny, Vivian, and Kathy, and all their friends play on the trains when it gets dark. We play tag and run up and down the aisles of the trains. We make lots of noise, yelling and laughing, and our feet bang on the floors as we run. I am the baby of my family, so everyone looks after me. I am never scared, not even the times when the big man comes and chases us home. I think he is playing too.

One nighttime I have a dream. Me and Daddy are in a big parking lot. A whole bunch of black and white birds with long mouths are coming closer and closer. They can stand up and are not afraid of us. They are taller than me but not my daddy. Daddy is holding my hand and we are backing away from them. I look up at Daddy to see if we should be afraid, but he is just staring at them coming closer. Then we are at a wall and we can’t back up any more. I wake up. I never forget the dream. It is the first time I’m scared for real. And I’m scared because Daddy seems scared too.

Daddy tells us a story about the boogeyman. The boogeyman comes out at night and he looks for little girls and boys. And if he can catch them, he takes them home and eats them up. That’s a scary story, but Daddy’s not scared, so I like it.

Sometimes me and Sonny wake up early. We have to play quietly so we don't wake anyone else up. One morning he spots two breads up on the counter and decides we'll clean them for Mommy. He pushes two kitchen chairs over to the sink. He gives one bread to me. As we wash them, they turn into white sticky stuff. We try to get it off our hands with the dishcloth and, after, we wipe that on our clothes. Pretty soon it's on our faces and in our hair and on the chairs. When everyone else gets up, they're not happy with us. I am the baby of the family so just Sonny gets heck.

Only me, Daddy, and Mommy are at home when a strange lady comes to visit. The lady is mad at Mommy. I don't know why. She is yelling and Mommy yells back. I am sitting on Daddy's lap at the kitchen table. He is watching them and laughing. I don't know why he doesn't make that lady go away. The lady is big and she pushes Mommy. Mommy pushes her back. Then that lady pushes so hard Mommy bangs into the washing machine and falls down. She stands up again and they are yelling and slapping. First I am scared. Then I get mad at that mean lady. I slide down from Daddy's lap and kick that lady as hard as I can. Pretty soon after that, she goes away. I don't know why Daddy didn't help Mommy, but it makes me sad.

MAYBE WE STILL LIVE on Jarvis Street. We are all in a dark room. All the places we live in are dark. I don't know why. The door on the wood stove is open 'cause I can see the fire. I sit on Kathy's lap. Across the table, Vivian turns the handle of a meat grinder. I watch the squished meat come out of the holes. I reach over to clean some meat out of one of the holes with my middle finger. I feel a sharp pain and I scream. Something inside the hole bites my finger and I pull it out fast. My finger looks like the squished meat and it is bleeding, bleeding, bleeding and I am screaming, screaming. Mommy and Daddy take me to a hospital. When I wake up a doctor tells me he took some skin from my arm and covered the tip of my finger. Now a big bandage covers my finger and another one is on my arm. I want him to show me what my finger looks like but he says I have to wait.

ONE DAY WE ARE AT HOME, and then Sonny and me are in a big building looking at Daddy on the other side of a big see-through fence. We are so excited to see him but we can't get outside to talk to him. After he leaves, me and Sonny have to stay there.

THE HANLEYS' IS MY FIRST foster home. I don't know where they took Sonny and I don't know where my big sisters are. Maybe they are at home with Mommy and Daddy. I want to go home.

The Hanleys are rich. They buy me all new clothes. The dresses feel crispy and smell new, and the underwear and socks are so white and soft. They have an upstairs and, in the bathroom, they have a toilet that flushes, not a pail in a closet like at home, and they have a big bathtub. Sometimes they fill it with water and bubbles, and Mrs. Hanley or an older girl gives me a bath with soap that smells so, so good. They have a little spaniel dog that pees on the carpet every morning even though it gets heck.

I am three years old but I have to sleep in a baby crib. Two older girls sleep in the room too. One's got light brown hair and the other one has dark hair. From the way Mr. and Mrs. Hanley talk, the one with the dark hair is a "bad" girl. I think the Hanleys have an older son. He takes me for car rides. I sit on the front seat and I am too little to see outside so I watch his foot push the pedals. Sometimes we wait for a train to come, and he tells me to wave to the man on the train. I kneel on the seat and wave and I am so happy when the man waves back to me. The big boy ends the rides by telling me that I'm too heavy and his foot is getting sore from pressing on the pedals, and he takes me back home.

AN OLD, OLD MAN lives there too. His bedroom is upstairs, next to our big bedroom.

MR. HANLEY TAKES ME down to the basement and sits me on a high chair. Then he cuts off my hair.

MY BEST FRIEND IS NANCY. She lives one, two, three houses from us. She is older and she takes me to bible school, down the block and across the street. I like bible school 'cause they let us cut and paste paper and they have colouring books. They show movies on the wall, about Jesus and God. Jesus and God have really nice voices.

ONE DAY, I'M IN the front yard. I look all around me. Everything is brand new. I don't feel too hot and I don't feel too cold. I feel just right. Someone mows a lawn and I like the sound. I breathe in all the way and smell the grass that's getting cut. Someone is painting a fence and I like the smell of that too. I lie down on the grass and look up at the grey, grey sky. I smell something else. It's the earth. I roll over and pick some up. I breathe in all the way again, and the earth smells so good. I put some on my tongue. I know I'm not supposed to eat it but I got to taste it. And I am so happy — happy to be alive!

I know about dying 'cause I already asked Mrs. Hanley about it. I asked 'cause of bible school and the prayer I have to say every night: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Mrs. Hanley says that means if I die while I'm sleeping, I'll go to heaven. Only good people go to heaven.

THAT OLD MAN UPSTAIRS, at first he reads me books and sometimes he tickles me and makes me laugh. Then later he tells to me to visit him in his room. I look at things on his dresser and shelves. There's a funny smell in his room. I don't like it but I don't say nothing. He wants to show me something special. He tells to me to climb up on his bed where he is lying down. His bed is way high up and he has to help me climb up. He tells me to lie down beside him. Then he pushes back the cover and he shows to me the special thing. I know what it is and I know what it's for. It's to put in a woman. He takes my hand and puts it on his thing. I know this is bad. I am bad. So I never tell anybody about it.

I AM SICK AND I have to go to a hospital. I have to always obey grown-ups. Vivian told me so. A nurse puts a bedpan in my crib. Then she tells

me to pee in the bed. I don't know what to do. If she wants me to pee in the bed, why did she bring me a bedpan? I have to obey her, so I pee in the bed. When she comes back, she seems kind of mad and she changes the sheets.

The next time she brings the bedpan, she tells to me to pee in the bed again. I don't want her to be mad at me but I have to obey. Again she is mad at me. When she brings the bedpan one more time, she just puts it in my bed and walks away. So I use the bedpan. I know how to use a toilet, but she never asked me that. Back at the Hanleys', I pee in my crib so the old man won't touch me when he comes in at night.

ONE DAY MRS. GIRWELL comes to pick me up in a car. She's a social worker. She is the lady who drove me to the Hanleys' place to live. I love car rides and we go for a long one. She tells me I am going to see my parents. Inside me I am so excited but I don't let her see that. I don't know if Mrs. Girwell likes me or not. She doesn't talk to me very much. If she doesn't like me, and she knows I am excited to see Mommy and Daddy, she might not let me see them. So I just be very quiet.

We come to a Children's Aid building and she leaves me in a small room. Later a woman opens the door and says, "Eddie's coming up the stairs."

Eddie? Who's Eddie? I think she should be telling someone else. But then, Sonny walks in. That's how I find out Sonny's real name is Eddie. Eddie has thick, curly hair like Mommy. Mine is straight. And short. Vivian and Kathy and Mommy and Daddy come too. They bring us donuts and candies. Kathy and Vivian are almost grown up.

Everybody talks and laughs. I mostly listen. I tell them only a good thing about the Hanleys: they have a piano that makes music so I danced a jig for them. I don't tell them about the old man.

When this visit is finished, I think we will all go home together. I wait and wait. When Mrs. Girwell opens the door and tells to us it's time to leave, I'm so happy. We all put our coats on to go home, but Mommy bends down to hug me goodbye. I can feel her wet cheek on my face.

Another time I'm in the back seat of Mrs. Girwell's car and I have to go back to the Hanleys' place. I see Mommy and Daddy walking

down the sidewalk, holding hands. They don't see me but I'm so excited. This is like having an extra visit. Maybe Mrs. Girwell sees them but she doesn't say nothing. I watch out the back window and they get smaller and smaller. Mrs. Girwell makes the car go on another road and I can't see them anymore. I'm happy they are together but I wish I could be with them too.

At another family visit I find out that Sonny lives with an old lady in a place called King's Park. Vivian lives with a family in St. Norbert. Mommy and Daddy give me a panda bear and he is black and white, and I call him Andy Pandy. I sit on the floor and play with him and I hear Mommy and Daddy talk to Vivian about Kathy. Kathy doesn't come to family visits anymore. Children's Aid says she is a bad girl and they make her live with other bad girls. The social worker said Kathy runs away to go back home to Mommy and Daddy. To me, she is good for doing that. When I get older, I think I'll do that too.

When Kathy was at the family visits, me and her are quiet. Vivian and Sonny, they talk a lot and make us laugh. Vivian is my favourite sister 'cause she teases me and makes me laugh so much. Mrs. Girwell told me I can't go live with Mommy and Daddy. Maybe they are bad. I don't want anyone to know I think that so I can't ask anybody about it.

I ASK MRS. GIRWELL and I keep asking Mrs. Hanley if I can go live with Vivian. If I live with her it will be a little bit like to be at home. I will be so happy. And one day, it happens!