

THE SHOE BOY

A Trapline Memoir

DUNCAN McCUE



I STRAIGHTEN MY SILK tie, take a deep breath, and open the elegant mahogany door.

The hotel ballroom is resplendent. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm golden light, candles flicker on each of the linen-draped round tables. I'm at an awards dinner, where members of the press gather to honour professional excellence.

There are a few reporters here I recognize but, mostly, these ceremonies are the domain of executives: senior editors and producers anxious to add more awards to those already lining their newsroom walls – like the mounted heads of so many trophy bucks. Advertisers willing to pay top dollar for a plate make the rounds, shaking hands enthusiastically.

Taking my seat, I am quietly considering the numerous bottles of wine circulating our table when two producers begin to banter about summer camping trips.

—Well, it's not really *camping*, laughs one woman. More like car camping.

The producers wax poetic about week-long hikes and canoe trips in their younger days. Not anymore, they say, not unless there's a hot shower in the campsite.

For a TV reporter, a guy who converses with people for a living, I'm horrible at small talk. In the back-and-forth tennis rally of cocktail party chit-chat, I often double-fault my opening serve. But, tonight, I'm warming to the topic at hand, and decide to interject.

—I once lived in the bush for five months, I say. We washed our hair three times, in a laundry tub.

The women turn to me with curiosity. I'm the only Indian at the table. At parties full of smart and wealthy white people, I'm accustomed to being perceived as both exotic and oppressed. In such settings, I rarely share stories about the season I spent living in the wilds of northern Quebec with a Cree trapper and his family. But, tonight, this feels good.

—We trapped otter, muskrat, and beaver. We snared rabbits. We hunted grouse, ducks, and ptarmigan. We shot a caribou and a bear.

In this crowd, I may as well be talking about my trip to Mars. But I'm not whipping this story out

as a badge of Indigeneity, like a Costco card that proves I'm a paid-up member of the club. No, this story is like the rosary beads in my mother-in-law's purse: worn and comforting, yet an enduring symbol of mystery. It's been over twenty years since I went hunting in the bush with Robbie Matthew Sr., and I'm still trying to unpack what I learned there.



THE LAUNDRY TUB is one of those square-shaped galvanized metal buckets. It's full of hunting gear and it's damn heavy. My forearms and back are killing me, the metal is cutting into my gut, and a frayed old rope tied to the handles keeps catching on tree limbs. I'm tired, hot, and pissed off. I drop the bucket at my feet.

I stand on the trail for a while, sucking in cold October air. I am deep in the bush, hundreds of kilometres northeast of my home in Chisasibi, northern Quebec. It's been a couple of months since I arrived on the trapline, an eternity in teen years.

This portage is not long. Maybe a kilometre. The trail is slightly uphill, as it winds its way through the black spruce. I hear Robbie's footsteps behind me.

Robbie – who is about fifty-five years old, to

hazard a guess – has passed me twice. Once carrying a load, once again as he returned to the boat for another. Now, he's going to pass me again. The old man is lapping me.

His back is bent as he comes into sight. His back is always slightly hunched over. Despite the wintry chill – the first snow will arrive soon – he has shed his camouflage hunting coat. He's sweating. He carries four shotguns, two balanced on each shoulder.

He stops in front of me. He doesn't say anything. He smiles. It might be a grimace, but I think it's a smile because I can see the gap in his teeth. He leans the shotguns, standing, against a tree trunk, then returns to me.

He grabs the rope tied to the handles of the laundry tub and turns his back to me. He flips the rope over his head, and bends his knees slightly. Bracing the rope across his forehead, he hoists the laundry tub onto his back. He's not using the handles at all. The rope was a tumpline.

With the heavy tub on his back, he returns to the shotguns, kneels slightly to replace them on his shoulders, and heads up the path, carrying his load, *and mine*. I'm left standing in the middle of the woods with nothing to carry.



WE MOVED TO Chisasibi when I was twelve years old. I vaguely recall my father tracing his finger over a map, starting at the small town where we lived in southern Ontario. Up, up, up his finger went, stopping at a much smaller community on the eastern shore of James Bay. All I could tell was it was really far north and it didn't look like there were many roads up there. I knew we were moving to a Cree Indian reserve, but I was just a kid. I didn't know the difference between Crees and Ojibwes.

I grew up understanding that I was an Ojibwe Indian, though in terms of blood quantum, I was born a half-breed. My father was a professor of Native Studies at a small liberal-arts university. His deep pride in his Ojibwe heritage not only defined his career, it shaped our household. There was Indian art on the walls, and shelves piled high with books about Indians. My mother – blond haired and blue eyed – also did her best to bolster my Indian identity. When she came upstairs to read me bedtime stories, she would slip my feet out of the small moccasins beautifully beaded by my grandmother, and read me a mixture of English classics and Indian legends. My eyes grew droopy listening to her comforting voice read *The Wind in the Willows* or *Nanabozho and the Rabbit*.

My father made sure I knew my Indian name – *aanakwadoons*, which translates as “Little Cloud” – but he didn’t speak Ojibwe. His parents only taught him English, ostensibly to protect him from the alienation and racism they had experienced. In the little community where he grew up, other families also bowed to the pressures of assimilation, speaking only English to their children. Just a handful of elders, my grandparents included, still spoke *anishinaabemowin*, the Ojibwe language.

Relocating to Chisasibi promised to be like travelling to a familiar yet foreign land. The Ojibwe and the Cree are neighbouring tribes, historically friends though sometimes enemies. Different, but not too different, like the Italians and the French – as my father explained to his white university colleagues, who I expect couldn’t quite fathom his departure. Isolated by geography, the James Bay Cree retained much of their traditional lifestyle, and everyone spoke Cree as their first language. This, in part, is what attracted my dad to the place. He saw his new job – managing the Cree school system – as an opportunity to learn something deeper about Indigenous culture. And, in the back of his mind, I’m sure he felt it would teach me something about my own Indian identity.

That first year in Chisasibi was the most difficult and lonely of my life. I was an Ojibwe kid who went from being the only Indian in my elementary school to a high school where the kids called me *waamish-tikushiuu* (“white man”) because I didn’t speak Cree. I was bumped up two grades because, in James Bay, any kid who went to class every day was considered a scholar and any kid who did homework was considered a miracle. The kids in my class were three or four years older than me, seven or eight inches taller. These were kids who sometimes lit cigarettes in the school hallways and, when asked to butt out, told their white teachers to fuck off.

I had few friends.

The clash between Cree and white culture was nowhere more evident than in the students’ lackluster classroom attendance. The Cree were hunters; if there was one thing the missionaries taught them long ago, it was that you don’t learn much about hunting in the white man’s school. Even Cree who did complete their schooling – and there were more and more of those – still hunted.

Before moving to James Bay, I had never hunted in my life. Hunting was stuff the cartoon Indians did in *Peter Pan*, dancing around in circles with bows and arrows. My dad and I enjoyed fishing for

small-mouth bass and perch with rod and reel, but it was my mom who brought home our meat. From the grocery store. Amongst the Cree, this would not do.



AFTER WE ARRIVED in Chisasibi, my father and I were promptly invited on hunting trips, where I was introduced to my first shotgun. My dad presented it to me – a 16-gauge from his own youth. To load a shell I had to break open the barrel, then break it open again to discharge the empty casing. This antique astonished the Cree men. They all sported the latest in hunting technology – shiny semi-automatic Winchester and Remington 12-gauges that held several shells at once and fired as rapidly as they could squeeze the trigger.

They made a big deal of passing around my 16-gauge, which apparently reminded them fondly of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

When it came time to practice, everyone reminded me to “lean into it.” I squinted down the barrel at the soda pop and beer can targets, steadied my breathing, and gently pulled the trigger. The sudden explosion in my ears caught me completely off guard. That shock was nothing compared to the

wallop of pain as the gun recoiled into my unsuspecting shoulder. Shooting isn't as easy as cowboys and Indians make it look in the movies. Shooting a moving object – one that is flesh and blood and doing its damndest to get away from you – proved to be even more difficult.

Naturally, my first hunt with the Cree was for geese. Millions of geese and ducks use the coastline of James Bay to rest and feed during their annual migration, and the Cree had long planned their own movements around goose hunting grounds. To this day, “goose break” is pencilled into every Cree calendar: those periods of time when geese flock north in the spring and south in the fall and everyone heads to family hunting camps, leaving the village virtually deserted.

The camp was a few hours' drive from Chisasibi. We spent the better part of two weeks in the bush, three families sleeping in two big white canvas *maahkii*. I was surprised to discover goose hunting is a stationary affair. On my first day, after spending hours sitting in a blind made of willow and tamarack, looking out at a muddy, shallow pond half-covered in ice and decorated with wooden and plastic decoys, a dozen geese appeared suddenly on the horizon.

The men began calling to them. When it became

clear the flock was attracted to our pond, the hunters went quiet, shushing me. We all crouched, still, no one moving. I held my breath, my head tucked into the spruce boughs on the ground. I kept one eye looking up, hoping to catch a glimpse of the geese, now circling above us. All I could see were clouds, silently floating past in the grey-blue sky. But I heard the geese. The wind whistled through their flight feathers as they glided over top of the blinds, ready to touch down on water. Then, the jolting *BLAM!* of one shotgun. The men around me sprang to life. *BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!* I leapt up like a jack-in-the-box to see geese wheeling dramatically in the air, honking, pumping their powerful wings to escape. *BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!* I pointed my gun at the nearest goose, only to watch the bird crumple in mid-air and plummet to the earth, shot by another hunter. *BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!* I attempted to refocus on another goose. The same thing happened. *BLAM! BLAM!* As fast as they had arrived, what remained of the flock retreated. The men happily waded into the pond to gather their kill. I hadn't even fired one shot.

This scene repeated itself daily for over a week, until – after much trial and error – I finally managed to kill a goose. I figured it took pity on me, because it landed in the pond so close to me I could have whacked it

with a stick. It was my only kill that year. But it was a significant achievement, not only to me, but also to the family who hosted us. A boy's first goose is a milestone in Cree life. A feast was held in my honour. My goose was cooked over the fire, and everyone in camp ate a piece. I was now a provider. While I harboured serious doubts about my abilities as a hunter, the feast made me feel connected to something older and larger than myself.

Still, my parents worried about my schooling. After spending only a year in the north, they asked me if I was interested in attending a prestigious boys boarding school in the south. It was a difficult decision for them. The annual tuition cost as much as a new car, and I would be living over fifteen hundred kilometres away from home. But they concluded my hunting grounds should be territory more familiar to me: textbooks and classrooms. James Bay became a place I visited during Christmas, March break, and summer holidays.

Four years later, high school graduation imminent, I was mulling over the merits of various universities when my dad asked if I'd like to take a year off school to go out on a trapline. I could smell the wood smoke and taste the dark wild meat. I said yes.



I WAS SEVENTEEN years old that autumn I went to live in the bush with Robbie Matthew Sr. and his family.

Amongst both Indians and whites, I'd spent my early adolescence feeling perpetually on the peripheries of the teenage tribe, grimly aware that I was a nerd. At James Bay Eeyou School, older and brawnier classmates regularly ridiculed me, sometimes using me as a punching bag if words weren't enough to bring me to tears. At Lakefield College – a private school where most of my peers seemed destined at birth to win spots in highly competitive commerce or pre-med or international studies programs – I skipped a grade, so I was once again younger and smaller than my companions. My regular appearance on the honour roll earned me an exemption from the drudgery of nightly study hall, but it did little to advance my cause in the battlegrounds of hallway and dressing room, where your position in the pecking order of an all-boys school is truly conferred.

Despite my obliviousness to fashion and my large-rimmed glasses, my exit from geekhood seemed imminent the year I finished high school, thanks in large part to my girlfriend.

Sydney was cute, perky, and had regular access to her mother's car. We met soon after I graduated – I was spending the summer piloting ferryboats to our island reserve, and she was teaching swimming to little kids at the government dock. It stunned me that she had not only taken an interest in a poetry-writing wallflower, but had also let me go all the way. I was no longer a virgin. I was also smitten. But as much as walking beside her along the lakeshore holding her hand did wonders for my confidence, I also knew I couldn't reciprocate when this white girl whispered in my ear, "I love you."

My reticence was due in large part to the duality that nagged me my whole life: I always felt, somehow, I wasn't Native enough.

To my white girlfriend, my Native-ness was a curiosity, maybe an attraction. To my white classmates, my Native-ness wasn't even on the radar. As far as they were concerned, I didn't talk, dress, or act like an Indian.

On the flip side, my upbringing off-reserve set me apart from my own First Nation. I wasn't totally disconnected: I visited my grandparents for idyllic stretches of summer throughout my childhood. But when I accompanied them to community gatherings, whether funerals or elections or regatta days, I was a

visitor – connected by blood to a large web of people I didn't know and whose names I couldn't keep track of. This place where so much of my family history was rooted was distant to me.

When we moved north, I was the lonely kid hunched over the keyboard of a Commodore 64 computer or slouched in the corner of the library where my mother worked. There were no Natives to be found in such places. Was this the natural habitat of my white-ness?

The one place I always felt at peace – freed from paralyzing nerdiness or confusing cultural duality – was outdoors. Navigating a boat on the lake, skating on a pond, sitting on a dock under a night sky, I felt more harmony than could be found in books. The pleasure I experienced in natural settings made me terribly envious of my Cree peers. They possessed knowledge and confidence I did not – to shoot a goose, set a snare, build a tent – to *survive* on the land. I wanted that. I wanted to be able to read the land as assuredly as I could delve into Shakespeare's sonnets.

Upon graduation, I knew I was at the top of the heap – at least when it came to developing thesis statements or stringing together words. And, for the first time in my life, I had a girl. A beautiful one. Against all odds, “cool” seemed tantalizingly within

reach. Months on a trapline in the wilds of James Bay promised deliverance from the self-doubts that nagged me, even if I did worry about not having a clue what I was going to be doing out there.



IT'S EARLY AUGUST when the cargo van from the airport deposits me at Robbie's home. I've never met the man, though my parents had lived in Chisasibi for five years. His house is a two-level bungalow with brown wooden siding – that familiar Indian Affairs sameness, indistinguishable from every other house in Chisasibi. I walk in the front door without knocking, as is Cree custom, to discover a wall of people waiting to greet me.

It seems as if Robbie's entire family is here: sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren. Robbie has nine children, so this is a sizeable group. The welcoming committee shouldn't surprise me – the Cree are always curious about a newcomer – but I stand at the doorway, dumbfounded and suddenly shy. I take off my work boots and one little kid, with dark eyes and a runny nose, puts his feet into them and starts clumping around the house. I'm immediately introduced to Sally, Robbie's wife, who's in the kitchen,

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