

# Indians on Tour (or Scouting for Monias)

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Richard William Hill

With thanks and apologies to Jeff Thomas and Joseph Conrad and to Jimmie Durham, who got me thinking differently about chairs.



*In 2053, Dr. Michael Poitras, a Cree professor of quantum physics working at the University of Toronto, discovered the secret of time travel. He chose to forego the inevitable Nobel Prize, and kept his discovery to himself. Working busily for five years, he completed more than 90 trips to North America in the first century BCE. His plan was to empower Aboriginal nations with the technology to defend themselves against colonization. Not everyone agrees that he got the balance quite right ...*

Cree Britain, 2003, a highway south of Mistahi-sipihk. (Mistahi-sipihk means “Big River” in Cree, although before Dr. Poitras altered the course of history it was better known as London, England.)

Muskwa and his two daughters, Tanis, age 8, and Papewe, age 16, are driving on highway 7 toward the Monias (white) reserve community of New Mosomin. They are going to visit the natives.

“We there yet?” Tanis asks from the passenger seat.

“We’re getting close.”

“How close?”

“Pretty close. Just hold on.”

“Like five minutes close?”

“Well we’re going to turn off the highway in about 10 minutes. Then maybe twenty minutes on the road to New Mosomin.”

“Twenty minutes!”

“Yeah, it’s slow because the road can be a bit rough. It’s not paved. That’s why it’s a good thing that we have the Scotsman 4 x 4. We may need the four-wheel-drive, especially if the rain has turned the road to mud.”

From Papewe in the back seat: “You’re always justifying the SUV. It’s a gas pig. Don’t you care about the planet?”

“Of course I do. But I need the Scotsman for my work. How else would I get into some of these remote communities?”

“You just have it ‘cause you think you look cool in it. Mister macho mid-life crisis ...”

“Dad, hey, dad?”

“Yes Tanis?”

“Dad, I like, really gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Ah! You can’t wait?”

“Not twenty whole minutes.”

“Well there’s a gas station at the turn-off. We’ll stop there.”

“Thanks dad. You’re right dad, about the SUV. Totally, we need it. And it’s so cool!”

“What do you know about cool, geek? You just always agree with dad,” said Tanis.

“Do not!”

“Just always!”

“Well dad’s smarter than you. You’re just dumb dog shit!”

“You are!”

“Okay! Okay! Enough about the Scotsman! Just calm down, both of you.”

A minute of strained silence ensues.

“Dad, hey, Dad?”

“Yes Tanis?”

“What’s a Scotsman . . . you know, like besides being a cool SUV?” She glared at her sister. “Or is it just a made-up name?”

“No, the Scotsmen were Indigenous people who lived in the north. If you meet one that still has his traditional family name it will probably start with a ‘Mc’ or a ‘Mac.’” Bright Star, our old housekeeper in Mistahi-sipihk, was part Scottish. Her great-grandmother’s name was probably McTavish or something like that.”

“Really? Cool. Will we meet any today?”

“Not on a reserve this far south dear.”

“Oh. Too bad. So how come they named our car after ‘em?”

“Well, there are a lot of cases where they use Indigenous names for things. You know, like some of the lacrosse teams. Some people say it’s a way of showing respect.”

“Oh.”

“What he’s not telling you,” piped in Papewe, “is that the Scotsmen were famous as fierce warriors and the car companies wanted to make guys like dad feel tough while they’re driving around in their big gas-guzzling SUVs. Right dad? You know what they say, big car, small...”

“I . . . that’s not why I have it. And besides that stuff about the fierceness of Scotsmen is probably just a stereotype anyway, something the colonial government made up to justify colonization.”

“I don’t know dad, not from what I’ve read. I mean they painted themselves blue and would get drunk and go into battle naked. Sounds pretty fierce to me. Kind of cool too, you know, in a primal sort of way.”

“Well, they were primitive people and did things that seem strange to us now, but remember they had their own beliefs. And their land was being taken away.”

"I know. I'm not putting them down. I think they were awesome. You should have told me Bright Star was a Scotsperson dad. I had a lot of questions I'd like to have asked her."

"I'm not sure she would have wanted to talk to you about it dear. I think she's a bit embarrassed about her Indigenous heritage."

"In this day and age?"

"Well, she's been through a lot, but yeah, I think so. I mean she was always down at the tanning salon and she dyed her hair black . . ."

"You mean that wasn't her real colour? You know I think it's sick that in this society if you don't have black hair or you're a bit skinny no one wants to look at you. I think skinny women can be pretty too. It's just the media that creates these racist and unrealistic expectations. I think it's sick."

"Me too dear."

"I don't," said Tanis, "some people can't help it if they're prettier than others. And skinny girls are gross with all their bones sticking out everywhere and everything. Everyone thinks so. Even Scotsmen people, I bet. The Monias are only fat on their bums."

"Oh, here's the gas station," their father interrupted. He pulled the vehicle into the gravel parking lot. Beside the pumps was a wood frame building with a façade of pseudo-stonework shaped in gothic arches. A hand painted sign read, "Monias Trading Post" and below that "Authentic Monias Arts and Crafts: discount prices on Monias made crafts, including hand made items from the Christ myths and much more!"

"Dad! Dad! A Monias trading post!" Tanis shouted. "Please can we go in? Please?"

"Honey, it's just tourist junk. Most of it's probably made in Turkey anyway. And don't call them Monias. They find it offensive. They prefer Indigenous Britons."

"But I really, really want to see it!"

"Well, you can run to the bathroom and we'll stop in quickly before we go."

"Thanks dad!"

The Scotsman's tires crunched in the gravel as the vehicle came to a halt beside the gas station. Muskwa took Tanis into the washroom where she squatted and peed into the toilet hole without pausing in her conversation.

"Dad, hey dad?"

"Yes, Tanis?"

"Can I get something in the store?"

"Maybe something small."

"Cool."

"Maybe."

"Cool."

The double door to the trading post was in the shape of a gothic arch. Panes of coloured plexiglas were set in a grid in the window.

“Pretty,” said Tanis.

“Tacky,” said Papewe.

The store was packed to the rafters with items of all kinds. The walls were draped with reproduction tapestries. There were dozens of plastic figures of a woman in blue robes and many crosses and dream-catchers. A large Cree man with a gut that stuck out over his belt stood behind a glass cabinet filled with rings, bracelets and other jewelry. He wore a large cross around his neck and a t-shirt with a picture of a Celtic wolf.

“Tansi,” the man said.

“Tansi,” their father replied.

“You folks looking for something in particular?”

“My daughter just wanted to browse around a bit.”

“Ah,” said the man, adjusting his gaze downward to his new target. “Well young lady if you have any questions you just ask. Some of this stuff may look strange and exotic, but if you know the myths behind them they can be really interesting.”

“Do you know lots about the Monias?” Tanis asked.

“Sure. Well, look where I live. Right here near the reserve. And I have good relationships with lots of my artists. I give ‘em fair deals and try to keep them on the right track, help them out when I can.”

“What are they like?” She snuck a glance at a row of crucifixes, then leaned forward in a conspiratorial whisper, “Are they kind of scary?”

“Tanis!” scolded her father and Papewe simultaneously.

“Well, look at that guy nailed to the wall. It’s creepy!”

The big man behind the counter chuckled. “Well, I can see what you mean, but that’s why I always say what I do about knowing the myths and legends. That guy nailed onto the posts there is their Christ god. He’s one of their most important gods. Nailing themselves to a cross was their way of showing their devotion. If you think about it, it’s not much different from the Sundance, right? Except they put nails through their hands and feet, which is pretty intense, but with primitive cultures they often have those, whatya call ‘em, religious ecstasies.”

“Well, that’s one version of the myth,” her father said, unconsciously rubbing his chest.

“My dad knows everything about the Monias.” Tanis said. “He teaches courses on them.”

“Oh yeah? Well then you must know lots of Christ myths . . .”

“I know a few,” their father admitted. “And enough to know that there are lots of different versions. Some people even say that their cross is just a bastardization of our evening-star designs. And of course they grafted in one of the more

violent Christ myths, the nailing one you were talking about.”

“Really, I never heard that,” said the big man. “You wouldn’t want to go saying that around here too much. They’re pretty proud of their Christ myths. Don’t even like ‘em to be called myths, really. They say it’s their “faith.” For them it’s all about believing. They see the Christ god as a big hero, kind of a culture hero, you know what I mean?” Tanis nodded. “So, in some of the stories he’s like this great warrior with this long coup stick, right? And in other stories he does all these magic tricks to convince everyone how powerful he is. Like changing water into wine. Or bringing down the power of the Thunderers to smite his enemies. Other times they call him the ‘Prince of Peace’ and he goes around telling everyone to love each other and that someday his kingdom will come and all the Cree will be swept away into the ocean and the meek will inherit the earth. Freaky stuff huh?”

“Sounds kind of confusing.”

“Well it can be. But partly it got all mixed up when Ahenakew the Conqueror banned the Christ cults just after the conquest. They even claim that way back when they had a codex with all the ‘true,’ he winked at Tanis, “versions of all the myths written down and that the conqueror had them all destroyed.”

“Nobody really believes that though,” their father said. “I think that’s just their way of trying to legitimize their ‘faith’ against all the pressure they’ve been under to assimilate. Their myths have been a powerful force in their cultural revival. When I was a kid, almost none of them followed the old ways, at least not publicly. They’d either be agnostics or would make their offerings to their guardian spirits and the four directions like everybody else.”

“I think it’s great that they’re reviving their traditions,” said Papewe. “Good for them.”

“Sure, sure,” said the man behind the counter, “and it’s good for business too, so what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” said their father thoughtfully. “It’s good to know your heritage. But at the same time, knowing it’s one thing and actually believing in it is another. I’m not sure what good clinging to this mythology will do for them in the long run.”

“Everyone’s so sceptical and cynical about everything these days,” said Papewe. “I think it’s really touching that they still have something to believe in that’s primal and connected to the earth.”

“Dad, hey dad?”

“Yes, Tanis?”

“What the heck is that thing? You sit on it, right?”

“That’s right,” said the big man, “Monias call it a Trone.”

““Throne,”” corrected her father, making the strange “th” sound that the local Monias used. The big man looked impressed.

“You speak Monias?”

“Enough to get by.”

“Well that’s more than most of the young Monias around here can say. But boy what a jawbreaker that language is. ‘Th,’” he spat, then chuckled. “Man, every time I hear that sound it just cracks me up. They come around saying ‘thhhis’ and ‘thhhat.’ A guy could bust a gut.”

“Pthh, pthh, pthh,” said Tanis, giggling. “It tickles your lips. So what’s a ‘Pthh-rone, anyways?”

“Well,” said her dad, “you have to understand some things about their traditional lifestyle and architecture to understand the throne. The natives here don’t like to sit on the ground or even on the floors of their houses. Nobody knows why for sure. Perhaps it goes back to ancient superstitions that have been lost to time. For whatever reason they used to insist on sitting up on these things called chairs. You put your bum up on the seat part with your legs horizontal to the ground and then bend ninety degrees at your knees so that your feet rest flat on the floor. Or at least that’s the classic position. In less ritualistic circumstances body posture within the chair can be quite variable – I mean it could change a lot. It’s necessary with chairs to move around a lot to remain comfortable. It isn’t natural for the body to be positioned with all those right angles, especially at the waist. How are you supposed to digest anything?”

“I heard they even sit on chairs to go to the bathroom,” said Papewe.

“That’s true, especially among the higher status members of the tribes. These things here are called armrests . . . can I show her?” he asked the big man.

“Sure. You won’t hurt it any.”

Their father got up onto the throne. “See, when I sit up in the traditional posture all my limbs are configured so that they are either vertical or horizontal. We haven’t figured out the symbolic meaning of that yet either. They use chairs in their domestic architecture, in their leisure and eating spaces and even in their sacred lodges. Those kinds of chairs are called pews. They’re long and many people can sit on them at once. They do get down on their knees on the ground to pray to their gods though.”

“Probably because it placed them closer to the earth. Primitive people are closer to the earth,” said Papewe.

“Maybe, but in their cosmology their god lives up in the heavens and the underworld is full of tormented evil spirits. It seems to have more to do with debasing themselves in the presence of their gods. One theory about the origin of chairs is that they were developed as part of the Christ mystery cults, as a way to keep themselves up off the earth, which they associate with evil.”

“But a throne is a very special kind of chair. It’s a chair that only their rulers, their kings and queens, could sit on.”

“Only them?” said Tanis. “That’s so cool. I wish I had a throne. How’s it



different from a regular chair?”

“Well it’s usually more elaborately decorated than regular chairs, but with real precious metals and jewels, not plastic replicas like on this one.”

“That sounds so elitist and lame,” said Papewe. “I bet that’s not how they were really used at all, I bet they were much more sacred.”

“Well there is a lot of evidence that they saw their leaders as ruling according to sacred prerogatives handed down by their gods. Divine right they called it. So they were probably sacred too, you’re right.”

“And the kings were like war chiefs?” Tanis asked.

“They were chiefs in everything and they passed their authority down in a hereditary system. Kind of like they do in the Haida Empire, but from father to son rather than matrilineally. Like Ahenakew tried to bring in after the conquest, when he declared himself war chief and chief for life. Then he tried to pass it on to his kids and there was almost a civil war. Some of these fascist warrior societies you see around today are still trying to bring back that kind of system.”

The big man straightened up and put his hands on his hips. With his lips he pointed to a tapestry on the wall. “I hope you ain’t one of them revisionist types going around talking down all our great heroes. I got no patience for that kind of thing. He founded our country. I got as much sympathy for the Monias as anyone. Like I say, I help them out all the time. I consider some my friends. But you can’t go saying white is black and right is wrong. Not in my store. Just the other day one of my artists said he was going to boycott Pitikwahanapiwiyyin Day. Said, ‘Why should I celebrate the colonization of my homeland? I told him Pitikwahanapiwiyyin discovered Cree Britain and if he didn’t have any respect for that and for our great traditions he could go find someplace else to sell his little Christ trinkets.’”

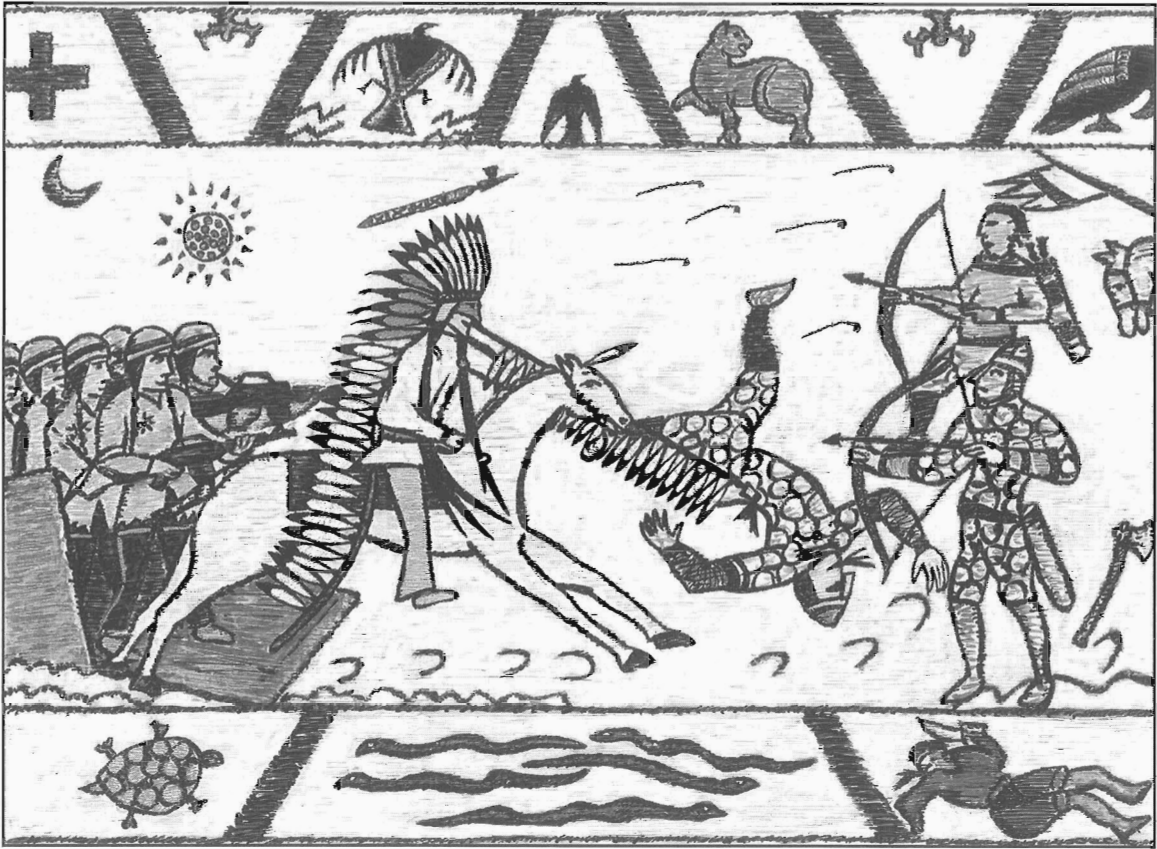
“Pitikwahanapiwiyyin was an important man,” their father said, picking his words carefully. “So was Ahenakew. No question about it. But there were a lot of excesses in that early period. Do you know that within twenty years after the conquest the Indigenous population of Britain was reduced to a quarter of its pre-contact levels thanks to warfare and new diseases?”

“I don’t know about that. Who says?”

“I don’t think those figures are in dispute. Look at this tapestry right here. Look how the Monias are represented. Do either of you girls know the name of this tapestry, the original I mean?” Tanis frowned and shook her head.

Papewe said, “It’s called the Yekawiskawikamahk tapestry, dummy. It shows the conqueror arriving with his armies in Cree Britain. Look at those poor Monias.”

“That’s right,” said her father, “it was commissioned by the Conqueror not long after the conquest. He got the native craftspeople to embroider it according to his own designs. The original is very, very long. This is only a detail. This is one



Yekawiskawikamahk Tapestry. detail, New Huronian, wool embroidery on linen, c. 37AC (After Conquest)

of the most famous scenes and right here you can see the beginning of all the stereotypes. It shows the Conqueror's warships landing at Yekawiskawikamahk. Look at the way they're bristling with guns. And here are his six war chiefs advancing on the Monias. That's Ahenakew in the front with the war bonnet and the Thunderbird tattoos on his chest. And he has the machine gun of course. And look at the way they show the Monias fleeing and prostrating themselves before him. That's where the myth of the passive Monias comes from. But how could they have fought back with their primitive weapons?"

"And here's another classic scene." Their father pointed to new detail, a group of war tipis pitched in a circle with a great bird above. Its body was in the shape of an hourglass, with the top triangle for his chest and the bottom his tail feathers. Lightning shot from his eyes. "See the war camp? This is a famous story from the Conqueror's first night here. You know he had a Thunderer guardian spirit? Well the first day, after defeating the first wave of native warriors, Ahenakew set up camp. That night there was a great Thunderstorm and all his warriors wept with joy to know that the Thunderers had followed them across the ocean to assure their victory in battle. Ahenakew said it proved his divine right to conquer this island. So you see why I'm sceptical of religion and the ways in which it can be used to support political ideologies."

"There you go with that revisionist crap again," said the big man impatiently. "Maybe..."

Tanis stepped in to cut him short. She pointed to a group of small mobiles, each a circular wooden frame woven with a web of coloured yarn.

"Ever cool, look at those! Mistahimuskwa has one in his father's car. They hang it from their rearview mirror."

"That's what they call a dream-catcher," said the big man.

"Dream-catcher?" Her eyes widened at the possibility. "It catches your dreams?"

"Just the bad ones. Or that's what they say. If you hang it by your bed it will catch all your bad dreams and only let the good dreams through. Or some people like to use them as decorations."

Tanis' eyes moved from the dream-catcher to her father. Back to her father. Back to the dream catcher. To her father again.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Tanis?"

"Dad."

"Uh huh?"

"I really want a dream-catcher, Dad."

"You do?"

"Sometimes I have bad dreams."

"Really?" He leaned over to whisper in her ear. The big man backed away

and pretended to study some of his other inventory. “Honey, those things, they’re just tourist stuff. They aren’t authentic. They aren’t going to catch your dreams.”

“They might. And they look so cool.”

Her father examined the price. Straightened up. Paused. “Okay, which one do you want?”

The Scotsman bounced along on its high suspension, Tanis’ new dream-catcher swinging from the rearview mirror. The road was rutted and the occasional pothole was deep enough to give the vehicle a jolt, even taken at low speed.

“Go faster, dad!” Tanis said. They didn’t. Before long they pulled into an equally rutted driveway with a small house at the end. Two dogs approached the car, tails wagging.

“Wait before you get out,” their father told them.

“I want to see the dogs,” said Tanis.

“Hold on a second. They aren’t city dogs. They might not be tame.” The door to the house opened and a man came out. He had brown hair and was tall and thin. He looked to be in his mid-thirties.

“Don’t worry about the dogs, they don’t bite,” the man shouted from the porch, “George! William! Leave them alone, come here you mutts!” The dogs didn’t obey, but their father and the girls got out of the car anyway, surrounded by a blur of wagging tails and snuffling noses.

“Tansi,” their father said.

“Tansi,” said the man.

“You must be Atahkakohp. I’m Dr. Muskwa.”

“That’s right, yeah. Good to meet you.”

“These are my daughters, Tanis and Papewe.” The man nodded to them. They looked up from petting the dogs long enough to smile back.

“Why don’t you come on in, if them dogs will leave you alone long enough.” It was a classic reserve house. Round and basic. The builders had made sure the door faced east, but that was about all the care they took. Tanis was wide-eyed as they came in the door.

“You guys have any chairs in here?” she asked, craning her neck from side to side.

“Tanis,” her father said, “this is a modern house, just like ours.”

“Not just like.”

“Sure it is.”

“Ours is nicer.”

“Tanis!”

“Ever ignorant,” said Papewe. “You have to excuse my sister. She isn’t aware of her own privilege and that she lives in a hegemonic society that

oppresses your people.”

Atahkakohp blushed. “Well, actually we have got some chairs down in the basement. Chairs and a big high table. But we only bring them out on special occasions.”

“Can you bring them out now?” asked Tanis, her voice rising in excitement. “My dad could help you, he’s pretty strong.”

Her father pointed to the low table in the centre of the room. There were cushions around it in a circle. “This will do fine. Now why don’t you girls sit down before you drive the poor man crazy?”

Atahkakohp brought a pot of tea from the little stove that sat on the floor and placed it on the table while his guests settled in. He took the customary seat across from the entrance with his guests seated to either side. There were many paintings on the wall that Tanis guessed were scenes from the Christ myths.

“So I guess I’ll get right to business, Atahkakohp. Like I said on the telephone, I teach at the University in the city. Well, maybe you’ve heard that we’re building a new faculty club? It’s going to be right on the river, really beautiful location.”

“Can’t say I’d heard that. Sounds nice though.”

“Oh, I think it’s going to be very good. And we have Cardinal as the architect. He’s brilliant. You probably saw his Museum of Civilization in Mistahisipihk? There are a lot of amazing native artifacts there.”

“Well I don’t get into town much, you know. Don’t like the big city. Prefer to stay close to the land and all that.”

Their father nodded his head approvingly. “Certainly, I understand. Well, anyway, in the new dining room there’s this one really long, curved wall that faces toward the windows. The windows look out onto the river. But anyway, some of my colleagues from the Native Studies program and I thought it would be great if we could get someone to decorate that wall with a big native mural. Something to remind us that our Indigenous people are an important part of our history.”

“Oh yeah.”

“You come highly recommended from a friend of mine who knows a bit about art. He says your work is the real thing. Authentic, you know? That’s the kind of thing that we want. Nothing touristy. The real thing.”

“Well, I lead a pretty traditional lifestyle out here. I’m still in touch with a lot of the traditional stories. I pray every night on my knees and everything. I even have a Monias name that was given to me by my grandfather.”

“That is so cool,” said Papewe. “Wow. Would it be rude for me to ask what it is?”

“No. We don’t keep any of our names secret. It’s,” he paused for effect, “Ted.”

“That’s so beautiful. Ted. What does it mean?”

“My grandfather said it meant ‘strong king.’”

“Really?” said their father. “I’m familiar with many Monias names. I’m quite sure that I read that Ted means ‘divine gift.’”

“Uh, yeah, well maybe that too. Sometimes they have more than one meaning.”

“You know we have a new kitten,” said Tanis. “Do you think you could suggest a Monias name for him? He’s really fierce and cute, so maybe a good warrior name.”

“Hmm. Well, uh, hmm. How about Jenny?”

“Isn’t that a woman’s name?” their father asked.

“Well not necessarily. There were some fierce male warriors named that. I’m pretty sure. I mean you may know stuff from books, but this is all stuff I learned from my grandparents. I mean it’s authentic. Like my paintings. When I paint one of the myths you know you’re getting the real thing.”

“That sounds perfect,” said their father. “So you’d want to do one of the Christ myths then? That would be great. Which one do you think? Not any of the nailing ones I guess? I mean, people are going to be eating in there.”

“Sure, sure, I know what you mean. It’d be a bit too . . . intense.”

“Maybe some of the birth stories. You know where the three wise elders from the east visit the baby and bring him gifts of gold, sweetgrass and blueberries?”

“Yeah, that’s a good one. Sure, I could do that. No problem.”

“I think it would be perfect. And not so shocking for people who, well, you know, don’t understand your culture so well.”

“Right.”

A door opened from one of the other rooms and a man came in. He was thin like Atahkakohp, but younger, perhaps in his early or mid-twenties. He closed the door carefully behind him.

He said, “I just got her down. Boy was she really fussing. Oh. Hi. I’m Mistawasis. I’m Atahkakohp’s brother.”

“Hey Mistawasis. This here is Dr. Muskwa, from the university and his daughters.”

“Tansi.”

“Tansi, good to meet you.”

“Likewise. So what are you doing here? Some kind of research or something? Want to see what makes the Monias tick?”

“No, no, just talking to your brother about getting him to do a mural for the new faculty club at the university.”

“That would have been my next guess. Native designs and all that?”

“We were just saying how nice a scene of the visit of the three wise elders from the east would be.”

“Well, that’s a popular one if you like that kind of thing.”

“I sure do. Are you an artist like your brother?”

“Well, yeah, I’m an artist. But not like my brother, no. I mean I don’t do the native art thing you know. No Christ stuff or Celtic designs or whatever. I’m not into selling the old religion . . .”

“Mistawasis . . .” said Atahkakohp.

“No problem, I’m cool, I’ll be good.”

“Mistawasis thinks he’s a big radical. Went to art school, does all this political installation art.”

“Need any political installation art for the faculty club?” Mistawasis asked.

“Uh. . . not at the moment, no. We have this one wall, you see and. . .”

“No problem, I was just kidding.”

“Well. Anyway. You know there’s a place for the traditional stuff too.”

“Traditional? Yeah. Sure. So you’re not throwing any crosses in?”

“Crosses are so cool,” said Papewe. “Dad you should get him to put some in.” And to Mistawasis: “I bet your art is awesome.”

Atahkakohp looked from Papewe to her father. “Well, maybe I could put some in as decorative motifs around the border. That sometimes looks nice,” said Atahkakohp.

“As long as they’re not too graphic . . .” their father said.

“I’m really into crosses, I think they’re beautiful,” said Papewe. “I even have a cross tattoo, look,” She pulled up the sleeve of her shirt. “Could you do some like this?” Atahkakohp and Mistawasis stared at her arm.

“I guess I could,” said Atahkakohp.

“It’s a nice one, isn’t it?” asked Papewe.

“It’s upside down,” said Mistawasis.

“Upside down?” said Papewe. “But it looks so much cooler this way, don’t you think? Or on the border you could alternate upside down ones with right side up, to kind of balance them out, you know?”

“You shouldn’t use it upside down. It changes the meaning,” said Mistawasis.

“Well . . .” said their father, “I don’t see what’s wrong with taking a bit of creative license. I mean traditions can change and evolve.”

“Yeah,” said Atahkakohp, “I could do something like that. Sure, it’s just a decoration on the border anyway.”

“I can’t believe you, man. And you claim to be traditional?”

“Just let it go, okay? What do you care? You always claim to be an agnostic anyway.”

“It still means something . . . Fine. Whatever.”

“So you think it would offend your gods to put it upside down?” asked Papewe.

“It doesn’t matter. And we don’t have gods we have just one God,” Mistawasis said.

“Just one? I always thought it was three?”

“Just one.”

“I don’t mean to tell you about your own culture,” said their father, “but in most of the documented Christ myths I know there are three. Not necessarily in the pan-Monias stories that circulate today, but in the ethnographies that were taken down in the old days. The father god. And his son, the culture hero called Christ, and then the Great Spirit. They call it a Trinity, because its three gods. Like a family of Thunderers.”

“They’re all aspects of one divine . . . oh never mind! If you say so. Think I’d better check on the baby.” He got up. “I’ll let you finish your business, bro. Try not to sell any of the family heirlooms while you’re at it.”

“Uh . . .” their father said.

“Don’t worry about it.” He went back into the bedroom. There was silence in the room for a minute.

“Wow,” said Tanis. “He was pretty mad.”

Atahkakohp shook his head. “He’s just gets that way ‘cause his art doesn’t sell. He’ll get over it. He’s not a bad guy really.”

“Maybe I should go explain to him that you’re an expert on the Monias, Dad,” said Tanis, frowning.

“Probably not a good idea dear.”

“Otherwise he won’t know you’re right.”

“It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have embarrassed him like that.”

“I’d like to see his little baby though. Monias babies are so cute.”

“I have lots of cute cards with pictures of Monias children if you want some. They’re from my paintings,” said Atahkakohp. He got up and gathered up a group of cards from off a shelf and gave them to Tanis. “Here, you can have these, no charge.” The pictures were soft-focus watercolours that faded off to white at the edges. The doe-eyed children in them looked up at the viewer with expressions that seemed just a little sad.

“Ever cute,” said Tanis. “You should put some of these kids in your mural too.”

“Well,” said Atahkakohp.

“It would be great. They could be like his older brothers and sisters.”

“He didn’t have older brothers or sisters.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. His mother had never been with a man before he was born.”

“Uh,” said Papewe, “not quite possible.”

“In the myths they say she was visited by the Holy Ghost – the Great Spirit, and he made her pregnant.”

“Okay,” said Papewe. “Let me see if I’ve got this right. First, the – what do you call ‘em? – the Trinity are all parts of the same god, right?”

“That’s what we believe, yes.”

“So Christ and the holy ghost are part of the same god?”

“Yes.”



“So basically this one god is having sex with his own mother and he’s his own father?”

“That’s not really how we think about it.”

“But, come on, I mean don’t you think that’s getting a bit close to the old incest taboo there?”

A long silence ensued. Tanis finally broke it. “Hey, do you think Mistawasis would mind if I went in and saw the baby? I’d be real quiet.”

“Not a good idea dear,” said their father.

“Actually I don’t think he’d mind,” said Atahkakohp. “He’s really proud of that baby. And he gets over things quick. Besides, if the girls go see the baby we can finish up our business.” Atahkakohp got up and walked to the door. He knocked quietly and went in without waiting for an answer. They could hear him whisper, “Hey Mistawasis, the kids want to see the baby.” And then he motioned them in, pointing with his lips.

“Don’t wake him,” their father warned. Both girls went in.

The two men spent several minutes talking about the mural, it’s exact size and cost per foot. Atahkakohp sketched out a rough design.

Muskwa said, “So, we’ve got the basic wise elders with gifts scene, with maybe some crosses around the border. Yeah, they look great like that. Do you think you could put in some Monias kids, maybe standing around the baby?”

“Like this?” He sketched in a few waif children gazing at the Christ child.

“Perfect. Tanis will love that.”

The bedroom door opened and Tanis came out. She closed the door quietly behind her. “Hey dad,” she said, “you’ll never guess what.”

“What dear?”

“They keep their baby in a little cage.”

“In a what? A cage?” he looked at Atahkakohp.

“Uh . . .” said Atahkakohp.

“Tanis, you aren’t making things up again?”

“No really, he’s sleeping in this cute little cage right now. Go see if you don’t believe me.”

“I think,” said Atahkakohp, “that she’s talking about his crib. It’s a traditional bed for babies. Mistawasis is into that kind of stuff.”

“A crib, I’ve heard of them,” said her father, raising his eyebrows. “Would it be alright if I have a look? And where’s Papewe? Why’s she still in there?”

“Oh, her and Mistawasis got into this big conversation about politics and oppression and everything. It was boring. So I left.”

They trooped quietly into the room. Mistawasis and Papewe were engaged in an intense discussion.

“See dad,” Tanis whispered, pointing to the bars of the crib, “little cage.”

“Don’t you even have a cradleboard?” their father whispered.

“Pardon?” said Mistawasis.

“A cradleboard. Don’t you have a cradleboard?”

“We have the crib.”

“And you just keep him in there?”

“Sure.”

“Hm.”

“Look, why don’t we all get out of here before we wake him up. I was going to take Papewe out to show her my studio anyway.” They trooped out of the bedroom and stood awkwardly in a group.

“Well I guess we ought to be going,” their father said. “Thanks very much for your hospitality, I’ll look forward to seeing your drawings for the mural when you’re ready.”

“But Dad,” said Papewe, “Mistawasis was going to show me his studio.”

“Some other time, we ought to get going.”

“But Dad, this might be my only chance.”

Her father leaned toward her, “I don’t want to argue about this. I don’t want you going off somewhere alone with that man.”

He had whispered, but Mistawasis overheard. “That man? I’ve got a name. But I get it. Don’t let the innocent women loose around the savages right? Who knows what we might do. She’s just a kid, do you really think... ah, fuck it.”

“We should go,” their father decided. “Mistawasis, you are a bright young man. Very articulate. But your anger is going to just get you into trouble. I understand that..”

“Yeah, sure you do. Patronizing asshole.”

“Mistawasis...” Atahkakohp warned.

Mistawasis ignored him. “Come in here like you’re a big expert, we should be so thrilled that you want to include *us* in *your* history. Want a mural so that you can sit around thinking how quaint we are every time you go in for a drink after teaching courses about us. ‘The Monias have three gods?’ Ha. You don’t know shit. How’s that for articulate? Well, I’ve read all the postcolonial theorists. Ever read a guy called Sartre? *Blond Hair, Black Wigs?*”

“It’s a classic text by a native writer from new Huronia,” their father replied. “He was a Frog. He was given the name Little Wolf, but took back his traditional name when he became radicalized. I don’t need you to educate me in native studies.”

“Well if you really read it you’d know that my brother is one of those colonial types dealing with internalized racism, trying to mimic back just what you expect from him. Be a good Monias.”

“Hey, fuck you Mistawasis...” Atahkakohp broke in.

Muskwa began to lead his kids out to the porch.

“And Frog? How can you still use that word?”

Muskwa opened the doors of the Scotsman for the girls. Tanis was crying.

Mistawasis kept shouting, “Don’t you know that when you guys first came to this country that was one of our insults for them? And because it was the first term Ahenakew heard, you guys just took it and used it as your name for them. And now everyone does. They prefer to be called Français, okay, since you’re the great expert!”

“Hey,” broke in Atahkakohp as they got into their SUV, “hey, I hope this doesn’t mean you don’t want the mural.”

They drove away.

“Fuck!” said Atahkakohp.

“Fuck!” said Mistawasis.

There was silence in the Scotsman for several kilometres.

Finally their Dad said, “You know it’s sad to see a young man so angry like that.”

More silence.

“He was wrong about the Trinity. All the books say so. It’s very clear.”

Silence again.

“And I know lots of native friends from across the channel who don’t mind being called Frogs.”

Silence.

“Another thing. I didn’t like the way they were taking care of that baby. That primitive crib-cage. And no cradleboard. I think a call to social services is definitely in order.”