The Story of Maggie Happyjack and Simon Etapp of Waswanipi

This is a story about two people, Maggie and Simon, from the small town of Waswanipi, Québec. When the humidity is high and the sun is up, Maggie and Simon feel it in their ears, in the places where their eardrums once broke and healed, and they know that the weather lady will say there's a low-pressure system moving over James Bay tonight, it's time to settle in for some weather.

Simon is older than Maggie, so this story starts with him. He was born in the bush outside of Mistissini with a heart condition. The doctors said he'd outgrow it, and eventually he did, but when he was a child it was quite severe and his parents or other people looking after him would sometimes find him on the ground, unconscious, and they'd know his heart was acting up again. The heart condition was so bad that Simon's father thought he wouldn't live to adulthood. Even so, the Indian Affairs people sent Simon from his home away to Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie when he was very young. So young he couldn't yet tie his shoes. So young that the school sent him back home, saying he was too young even for them. (He wouldn't remember that part later;

someone else told him about it.) Unfortunately, Indian Affairs just sent him right back to the school.

For a boy so young, Shingwauk was a scary place. The building seemed huge to Simon. Along with the other young boys, he slept in a long dorm room with many beds and tall windows. The older kids slept upstairs. There was a scary counsellor, a Mrs. Woods, who was old and strict and fond of hitting kids with a stick, and there was a metal fire escape that didn't quite reach the ground and scared little kids like Simon. What made it worse was that both of Simon's parents were sick. His mom was in the hospital and the doctor had ordered shoulder surgery for his dad. Away from people who loved him – people who were sick – and in a place where he was often afraid, Simon began to worry that he might never see his parents again.

One day, Simon and his friends were playing out in the snow, sliding down the hill. His sled crossed a trail and got too close to a branch and Simon cut his cheek. He left his friends and went to the Infirmary, where the nurse bandaged his face and sent him to dorm to rest. There, in his dorm room at Shingwauk, he passed out onto his bed.

Anyone looking on would have seen Simon collapse, unconscious again, his heart condition acting up, all in a day's routine. But for Simon this time was different. His heart came to a full stop. His spirit left his body and floated up around the lightbulb in the ceiling and then through the ceiling, and then through the roof, and then above the clouds. He could see everything below getting smaller and smaller as he kept going up. Waiting for him, above the clouds, was an angel, bright and white with arms open to receive him. The angel looked at Simon kindly, and then sent him back down, back down through the clouds, through the roof, through the ceiling, onto the bed, and back into his body.

Simon sat up in his bed. A tray of food was waiting for him. He didn't know who had brought it, but he picked up a fork and

began to eat.

He didn't tell anyone about that experience, not even his parents, for about fifty-five years.

Shingwauk was no picnic, but after a few years Indian Affairs sent Simon to the Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford – and for Simon that was worse. All the Native kids knew, Brantford was *bad.* It was one of the oldest Anglican Residential Schools in Canada and the people there had been practising how to hurt children for so long that they had gotten pretty good at it. They were so good at it that many of the kids who went to Brantford died while they were there, and more never made it home again. Mohawk kids had been sent to Brantford since the 1820s, but the Cree had been lucky to mostly avoid it for over a hundred years. Simon and his brother and two sisters were among the first unfortunate Cree to attend the place.

This is the part of the story where Maggie comes in. She was also from James Bay, from the community of Waswanipi. She didn't actually meet Simon properly until years later, but they were both Cree kids in the hell that was the Mush Hole. The good part was that they both survived. The bad part was everything else.

When they arrived, the first thing that happened was that girls and boys were separated. Maggie had come with her brother, (in later years, a second brother would join them), but he was put into a different dorm and she could have no contact with him at all. Every now and then, the single-file line-up of girls was in the yard at the same time as the single-file line-up of boys, and then she could at least lay her eyes on him, know he was still there, and move her fingers in a silent wave. As for Simon, if Maggie had noticed him in one of those line-ups, it would have been too risky to let him know.

The second thing that happened after they arrived was a haircut: Maggie got the same haircut as every other girl, and her brother and Simon and all the other boys had their heads shaved

bald. At that time, when Maggie was still healthy from a summer at home where she had had plenty to eat, a nurse would mark down her height and weight and give her a quick look-over. Maggie usually wouldn't see a nurse again, or have anyone do anything for her health at all, until she went home in spring to the people who loved her – but by then she was pounds lighter and nearly starved.

People called Brantford Mohawk Institute the Mush Hole because the food was so bad. Through the crack in the door, Maggie could see the teachers eating good meals, she could smell roast beef and potatoes and green beans in butter, but she and the other kids were made to eat porridge that had long ago been overrun with worms. Most of the worms were dead, boiled with the porridge, but sometimes a hardy one had survived and it still wiggled a bit, making the porridge surface heave. When the food wasn't worm-infested, it was too strange to eat. Even if it was something they could recognize, say potatoes or corn, it would be cooked down, mixed with other things, and creamed into a slop that could hardly be swallowed. Or animal parts they knew shouldn't be eaten – like pig skin with the hair still on it – would float in the bowl. And sometimes the stuff in the bowls wouldn't be food at all; it would be corn stalks or vegetable peels or a white-flour gravy with bits of something like sawdust mixed in and flavoured with salt.

Still, the teachers would stand over the kids, with hands on their hips and threat in their eyes, and the kids knew that if they didn't force the slop down their throats, they would be beaten and maybe this would be the beating that would put them in the ground with all the other kids who had been buried around there. Their bodies would not be tricked, though: even after dinner, sometimes Maggie would faint from hunger because the mush had no nutrition and her body was still starving. In the summers, Maggie and the others would go home and get healthy again on game and fish and blueberries. And then, inevitably, relentlessly, autumn would come around again and they would be hauled back to the Mush Hole

where they would force non-food down their throats and starve.

Some Mush Hole kids did see a nurse again before the end of the year. Not because they were sick – kids regularly died there from tuberculosis or measles, all without ever seeing a nurse. But some kids, like Simon and Maggie, were sent to a hospital to recover from beatings. Beatings of one kind or another were the main thing that broke up the monotony. Kids expected to have their ears boxed or to be swatted around the head, especially the back of the head where they couldn't see it coming, pretty much every week. There was a special small strapping room by the office and in it were two kinds of straps, one thin like a whip and one wide and flat that left a red mark on the skin outlining the shape of it every time it hit. The staff would take a kid into the room, close the door so there could be no escape, and strap the child on bare skin again and again. Simon was strapped because the counsellor mistook a patch of dark skin for dirt and thought he hadn't washed his hands. Maggie was strapped for speaking Cree – even in the first days of school when she didn't know any words that weren't Cree – and she was strapped for being so hungry that she picked an apple from the neighbour's tree and ate it. And sexual abuse, well, that was just part of a regular day. Everyone knew it was happening. Sometimes the principal would take a young boy or girl on his lap and molest him or her right there. There was also a counsellor named Mr. Boyce. At night he would stroll between the rows of kids sleeping in their beds – and suddenly a kid would begin to scream and everyone would know Mr. Boyce was at it again, sexually abusing another kid.

There were even stories of ritual abuse and torture. Years before, one of the older Mohawk students had seen the blood marks on the floor where a kid had been beaten to death. Other students had had their arms tied to water pipes or beams above their heads, and they would be beaten like that, along their exposed torsos – but neither Maggie nor Simon ever experienced those things. They

would hear the stories only after they were grown.

One of Simon's trips to the hospital happened when he was eleven years old. He stepped outside of school bounds and a counsellor, Mr. Roe, who was a big old man with huge hands, slapped him forcefully across the head and ears. Usually, when that sort of thing happened, the pain would go away after a day or two. But over the next few days, Simon's ear and head hurt more and more. Infection was setting in. After a week he was taken to the Six Nations Clinic: his eardrum had been broken.

Even though the wounds were shocking, and even though the doctors at the clinic could see in their examination that Simon had obviously been abused, they didn't ask any questions; they just treated the infection and transferred him to a city hospital in Brantford. The hospital wasn't any better. The nurses and doctors there offered no comfort or kindness. They looked after his bandages and made sure he had food and went to the bathroom and they kept him safe while he slept, but nothing more. They transferred him to a hospital in Amos to heal a bit more. By then it was time for summer break, so Simon went home. In the fall, he was back in the Mush Hole.

One of the worst things about living in a place like the Mush Hole is that people who are abused, who never get a rest from fear, will sometimes forget how to treat other people well. Sometimes they will even do to other people the things that have been done to them. Some of the older Mohawk youth, who had been there for a while and had survived all kinds of agonies, became bullies who terrorized younger kids. And when the new younger kids were Cree and not Mohawk, well, then the bullying was that much more intense. So the youngest Mush Hole kids who most needed comfort couldn't find it even amongst the other students.

Simon entered the Mush Hole at age 10 and stayed until he was 12 and Maggie entered at age 5 and stayed until she was about 12. There was nothing there *for* them, not even proper schooling.

Each day could be endured only because one day summer would come and they could go home. Some of the kids from other nations weren't allowed even that; they had to live there year 'round. In the history of the world, surely time never moved more slowly than it did for kids in the Mush Hole.

Many years later, in 2010, stories and news articles began to surface of investigators finding tools of torture at the Brantford Mohawk Institute, and of Institute administrators ordering topsoil to cover mass graves of indigenous children. Survivors were not surprised at what they were hearing and reading. Any time a kid had disappeared, the teachers had said "Oh, he ran away," or "Her grandma came and took her home." Of course the kids had known that the teachers were lying. Of course they had known that the school would never permit a grandmother to take a child home.

Life at home wasn't easy either. Most Cree parents had gone through residential school themselves and they had some idea of what their kids were going through. Maggie's parents could see by the vivid scars and gaunt frames that she and her brothers were being badly mistreated. They knew, too, that many children had died in the Mush Hole and that Maggie might well be the next little corpse buried on those grounds. Every August, Maggie could see the sadness on their faces. They would say "Go to school" and tell the older kids to look out for them – but Maggie could see they didn't want her to go. In the end what choice did they have? How could they possibly fight off Indian Affairs who came and scooped their small children away? After the kids had gone, the village would always be deathly quiet for a few days as the parents mourned. They had to turn to something and so they turned to alcohol. It helped.

In Simon's house in the summers, there were troubles too. First his father's feet were sore. And then they got infections that didn't heal. And then one of his legs was amputated up to the knee. After that, the atmosphere at home changed. His father, now in a

wheelchair, couldn't do all the things he had once done, and his mother didn't like that. And her health problems were just getting worse and worse. The house filled with their frustration.

In fact, what was happening to both of Simon's parents was diabetes. Diabetes was consuming his father's feet, and it had brought the heart disease that eventually killed his mom. But they didn't understand diabetes. By the time they learned what they could do to make it better, it was too late; they were already very sick. Years later, Simon would be bothered by this fact: his parents had not learned in time about all the things they could do to keep their diabetes under control.

His dad coped with his changed life by doing things with his hands. He had always been a good cook. When he still had both legs, he had cooked feasts for the entire village. Now he began to cook from his wheelchair, making big meals, whipping up bannock and prepping roast goose from his wheelchair and sliding them into the oven to bake. He also took up wood carving. He had a stack of birch wood in his bedroom, which he carved with a curved blade into animals and bowls and things. His bedroom became a workshop (Simon's sister was always cleaning up sawdust) and eventually he sold his carvings in an arts and crafts store.

One year, when autumn came around, Simon was not taken to the Mush Hole but to a school in La Tuque. It was still a residential school, still a prison, still desperately lonely, but for Simon it was so much better than the Mohawk Institute that he could hardly believe it. La Tuque was a real school. The children were taught by real teachers who expected them to learn. They were sent to bed in the evenings at 10 pm, after an evening of homework and chores and exercise instead of being locked away at 7 pm as Simon had been in the Mush Hole. La Tuque had actual activities for students. Canoeing, camping, swimming, walks, hockey, hockey, hockey. The hockey equipment was something of a joke – kids had to share

hockey sticks that should have been kindling years earlier and the blades of their skates had been sharpened so many times there was hardly any blade left. Still their hockey team was so good that the local white-skinned hockey teams tried to shut the native team out of the league. It was so good that people talk about it even today.

In this environment, Simon excelled. In 1966, he had excelled in so many different sports that he won Athlete of the Year. And the next year, 1967, he did it again. Of course La Tuque was a residential school. Of course there was abuse. But there were not nearly as many cases and they were not nearly as bad as those in Brantford. Of course it was terrifying, especially for the younger kids who didn't understand what was happening. And of course there were bullies. But Simon had learned from the best Mush Hole bullies and he knew how to bully right back.

Things got better for Maggie too. She was sent to high school in Rouyn-Noranda. She still had to be separated from her brother and other people she loved, and she still had to stay in boarding homes where she was treated like a second-class citizen. And after all those years of abuse and fear, depression came to her in waves. But there was more for her in Rouyn-Noranda than threat and violence: enough food, proper teachers, real opportunities to learn. She learned well enough to be accepted to a good college in Ottawa where she studied Secretarial Sciences for one and a half years.

Maggie and Simon had done the unthinkable. They had left the Mush Hole behind.

But really, can anyone ever leave something like the Mush Hole behind? Can anyone ever really get beyond it? The physical trauma alone took decades of recovery time. Both Maggie and Simon had such extensive eardrum damage that, over the next twenty years, they each needed several surgeries to patch their eardrums back together. Their surgeons asked them to bring old medical records so that they could be certain about the treatments

and medications they had received as children during their stays in the Six Nations Clinic and the Brantford Hospital. When Maggie called the Clinic, the clerk said that there were no records of her or Simon ever having stayed there; the records had been destroyed. And when she called the Brantford hospital, the lady on the other end of the phone line said the same thing: records from more than ten years ago had been destroyed, and there were no records of Maggie or Simon or any residential school students from those years.

But Simon had been in a hospital in Amos after his stay in Brantford, and Maggie had stayed in the Val D'Or hospital before being sent back to the Mush Hole. The Amos hospital and the Val D'Or hospital served Cree communities; they did not need to destroy incriminating documents. They had all the information, along with the records of extensive abuse, that Maggie and Simon needed.

And then there was the emotional trauma. Maggie and Simon worked hard to put memories of the Mush Hole away and out of their lives, but, still, memories haunted them. Maggie would be at the store or going for a walk and she would see a child being frightened by something or someone, and then without warning she would be back in the office at the Mush Hole, not just remembering but reliving an assault, feeling every fist and slap and strap all over again. The depression that had started at age 12 kept coming and sometimes overwhelmed her so badly that she could hardly get out of bed. She had come this far, though, and she wanted to live her own life, not the one her abusers had wanted for her. She kept going and worked with a psychologist to heal her emotional wounds. It took a long time, years and years, and a great deal of effort. And sometimes, even now, depression sneaks up on her and takes her off guard.

Simon tried to erase the bad days of his past by drowning them in alcohol and drugs, and working in sawmills and at other temporary jobs to support his habit. Maggie and Simon met properly

around this time, and Simon told Maggie she ought to be careful around him – he had a serious substance abuse problem. Maggie knew intimately the strength of Mush Hole memories and the ways they hooked a person's brain. She took him still, and looked after him as he gradually reduced his drug and alcohol dependence and sobered up. This too was a long, slow recovery.

Even three years after his last high, Simon had episodes in his sleep – he would be completely paralyzed, sweating so ferociously he would soak the sheets, his mind racing and his head throbbing in pain. Then his heart would slow again and he would fall back asleep. One night, during an episode, Simon prayed to the Creator, who had helped him get sober, to end these episodes. He felt the Creator touch him and the touch spread through his whole body. It reminded him of the angel that had met him above the clouds years before. That was his last night sweat. After that, Simon began to take his faith more seriously.

And then other health problems began to show up. In the late '80s, Simon was out on the territory, stake-claiming with a friend. Snowshoes strapped on, he was trudging through the snow, and he was thirstier than he had ever been in his life. He had no energy at all. Sure, he had gone a bit soft around the gut, but he was still an athletic man whose body had always done what he had told it to do. Now he had to guzzle jug after jug of juice just to keep going, and his friend was up ahead waiting for Simon to catch up. During his next check-up in Val D'Or, Simon asked his doctor about it, the hospital ran some tests, and the doctor told him he had diabetes. On his way out, Simon got some pills from the nurse who suggested briefly that he might want to watch what he ate and exercise more.

One summer, about ten years ago, Maggie and Simon were out in the bush with their daughter and grandkids for a summer holiday. Their grandson's eczema flared up badly, so Maggie drove

him into town to the clinic where a nurse looked after the boy – and noticed that Maggie was very pale. She tested some blood and they discovered that her hemoglobin, which should have been around 120, was at 36. Maggie was severely anemic. The clinic sent her to Amos in an ambulance for treatment and her grandson and the rest of her family followed the ambulance to Amos. She lay in the hospital for three weeks as they injected her with iron to raise her hemoglobin levels. Not long after that, the doctors discovered she needed a hysterectomy. In one of her check-ups after the surgery, Maggie learned that she too had diabetes. She wasn't too surprised – her mother had died of diabetes. And all those years of starvation and abuse in the Mush Hole had certainly affected her body's ability to process food.

Now, after Maggie and Simon both had endured cycles of starvation, they both lived with the very disease that had killed their parents. Once again, they had to obsess about food. Years earlier their parents had eaten bannock and jam by the plateful and as they ate they had wished out loud that there was something they could do to manage their diabetes; no one ever told them that the bannock and jam were making it worse. When Simon was diagnosed, the nurse had given him very little information, but he had studied on his own – in books, in libraries, in diabetic cooking classes – and, in his work as First Responder for the Ambulance Services, he was around many other people who had diabetes. By the time of Maggie's diagnosis fifteen years after his own, he knew quite a bit about the disease, much more than their parents had known, and he was fed up with feeling sick. He and Maggie talked it over. They were not helpless kids in the Mush Hole. They could take charge of their diets, of their lives. They could help themselves.

They both began to walk several kilometres a day, soon realizing that a walk out on the land was better for both mind and sugar levels than a walk around the track. And Simon, who did most of the cooking, overhauled the family kitchen. No more desserts or

bannock or potatoes that made blood sugar spike and more traditional game meats and fish that made them feel better immediately. He became choosy at feasts and ate the moose or beaver meat but left the gravy in the pot. Thickened with flour, the gravy made his blood sugar spike. He blended smoothies out of spinach and blueberries and flaxseeds and cinnamon and drank them for breakfast. He ate nuts by the handful and experimented with natural blood sugar controls he had read about – like raw onions or cinnamon or lime squeezed into water or apple cider vinegar sweetened with honey. (His grandchildren thought his food experiments were a bit weird.) When Maggie revelled in the occasional comfort of a piece of bannock with raisins, Simon didn't want even a bite. The inevitable blood sugar spike wasn't worth the pleasure. Besides, what could possibly taste better than whitefish sprinkled with a few spices, cooked over an open flame, and served with greens and cucumber tossed in olive oil? Only when they were out in the bush, where every part of every day included some kind of exercise, only then did Simon enjoy a piece of bannock or dessert. Maggie worked at her diet too. She carefully taught their grandchildren about diabetes and healthy eating, and she ate what Simon cooked – but she wasn't as strict. Sometimes a piece of bannock was absolutely worth the pleasure.

Maggie and Simon were no longer young. They had come through more trauma than most people could even begin to imagine, let alone endure. But the hardest thing of all was yet to come. In 2004, the remaining Cree survivors who had attended the Brantford Mohawk Institute chartered a bus to Brantford. They would step again onto that blood-soaked soil to face what had happened to them there. It was an extraordinarily difficult thing to do.

Some people sat in the bus all the way there and, when they finally arrived, they couldn't step off the bus and go inside. Others became physically ill when the bus rolled onto the Mush

Hole grounds. Maggie and Simon stepped off the bus and, with wet faces and racing hearts, they walked again through the dorms and bedrooms and dining rooms.

Everywhere, scenes came flooding back. Here, Maggie had been strapped within an inch of her life. There, Simon had been brutally assaulted. Here Maggie's ears had been boxed until they bled. There, Simon had stood paralyzed, too terrified to move. Around every corner, down every corridor were reminders that, as lonely as each of them had felt, there had been hundreds of children who had experienced exactly the same things. Written on the brick wall at the back of the school was name after name of Mush Hole students, names of people that Simon knew, names of kids who had also been afraid and mistreated. "Please help me," a child had scrawled onto the brick at the back of the school and right there, decades later, her desperation still cried out. Simon read it and his heart broke open, and years of pain deep inside awakened again.

One of the other men on the bus spoke of his hatred for the people who had abused the small boy he had once been. "I will take it to the grave," he said. Maggie and Simon understood. They had hated too. Hatred had pushed Simon into substance abuse and had left him a broken man with much personal work to do. And hatred had played a role in Maggie's relentless depression.

But Maggie and Simon didn't want to take hatred to the grave. They had come back for another reason. They were going to forgive the people who did those heinous things. Not because the abusers wanted forgiveness – that they deliberately destroyed records meant they probably had no remorse. Forgiveness wouldn't have mattered to them. Maggie and Simon had to forgive for themselves, for their own healing, so that they could finally let the Mush Hole go.

They stood in that place of fear and they prayed. First, they prayed to the Creator for their own healing of old wounds. And then they prayed for forgiveness – to forgive their tormentors, and to

forgive themselves for the ways they had learned from the bullies and had hurt other people.

A few years later, Simon attended a gathering of Six Nations survivors and some of the old Mush Hole stories came up again. They hurt less this time and Simon knew the prayers had been heard and he really had healed.

Forgiveness is a tricky word; it sounds like an easy thing to do but sometimes it's the hardest, the very hardest choice to make. Sometimes it takes everything out of you to make that choice. And Simon and Maggie made it.

This is a story about two people, Maggie and Simon, from the small town of Waswanipi, Québec. When the humidity is high and the sun is up, Maggie and Simon feel it in their ears, in the places where their eardrums once broke and healed, and they know that the weather lady will say there's a low-pressure system moving over James Bay tonight, it's time to settle in for some weather.