

Funny — I'm Still Looking for That Place

Morris Isaac

It started when a teacher counsellor told me that I was accepted in a Business College in Montreal. I had just finished my high school on the reserve so I was happy to hear that. I needed a change; the reserve was getting on my nerves. It wasn't the people who were giving me a hang-up, it was the whole atmosphere, the agency, the band council, and the committees I was on. It seemed as if they had a committee for every committee. We wanted to raise money for kids' recreation programs so we had bingos and card parties, but the people didn't have that much income. Most of the people then were on welfare, but now more and more young kids are beginning to discover high-steel. Young guys from the age of seventeen are leaving school and going into steel work. Most of them go to the States to work. One thing good about the work, it brings money into the reserve.

I was told I had to leave the following Sunday for Montreal. I packed my clothes and I was all excited to see the big city I had heard so much about. After fourteen hours on the train we pulled into Montreal in the morning. I was met by another teacher-counsellor who took me over to the place he had found for me; he called it a real wonderful place where I would have the opportunity to meet new people. I didn't know he meant children when he said new people; there must have been thousands of kids running around in the boarding place. He also asked me how my French was and I told him not bad. He was glad; he told me that I would get along just fine with the students there. None spoke English. We went into a small room and I sat down to wait, for I figured it was a waiting room. He told me that this would be my home for the rest of the year, and that they would get me a bed sometime today. I didn't want to believe him — what I had thought was a waiting room suddenly turned out to be my home. He said I probably was the luckiest guy in the building, because I was the only guy with a sink in his room. I'm sure they didn't put

that sink just for me. I didn't even have to get up from my bed when I wanted to wash; even if I had wanted to, I couldn't. The room was only big enough to open the door to get out.

The next day he took me over to the school to register. As we entered the building I noticed that the inside looked as bad as the outside. The atmosphere didn't seem too bad and some people had friendly faces. There were more girls than boys, and I knew I had made a right choice in education. As we toured the school I started to think about the reserve. I don't know if it was the building that made me think of the reserve; it was old, dirty, and very cold. The students seemed friendly — some of them were rich and probably couldn't make it in other schools, some of them were dropouts, and some couldn't afford to go to other schools. So I guessed I could identify with some of the students. The principal kept telling us that we would be moving to another building. He felt the same way about the building as we did, but he had signed a lease and I guess we had to stay till it ran out. He told us that we could study more and probably have more success in the next building. Somehow that didn't work for me; I had the same problems in the next building. I still don't know what went wrong.

I did learn some important points about life in the business training. I learned that I should try and mind my own business a little more. I spent the first year in college trying to figure out what debit and credit meant. The teacher couldn't believe me when I said that I didn't know what he was talking about. I did have a little experience with credit cause all I did was borrow money from rich friends. The guidance counsellor told me to socialize and meet new people so I used to go to night-clubs to socialize. Very often people started to talk to me and I didn't know who they were. They knew my name and they knew I was Indian. They told me later that I met them when I was at the club the last time. I guess that's part of socializing.

The first year in college was a drag, but the nine months seemed to fly by. Then it was time for me to go back to my reserve and the first person I had to see was the superintendent (they don't like to be called Indian Agents). I had to give him a report on how I enjoyed myself in a white-man's world. He

asked me, with a smile on his face, if I could balance the books yet. I asked myself what the hell he meant by that, and I thought he meant my weight. I told him that I had gained a few pounds.

I hung around the reserve for about a week and then I decided to go to Boston. I wanted to work before I returned to Montreal for my second year in business. I wanted to work for some spending money and new clothes, seeing that I had to wear a necktie every day at the school. I think that was the thing that I hated the most — wearing a necktie. I used to feel real funny, and I used to think what the fellows on the reserve would say if they saw me. They would laugh me out of the reserve.

I left for Boston on a Sunday. I got a ride with a steel-worker; I arrived Monday morning with a dollar in my pocket but it didn't worry me because I had a brother in Boston. He would tell me where there might be jobs. He said he had a good job for me if I only had arrived a week earlier. I asked him what the job was. He said with a smile on his face, a garbage collector; the funny part was that he was serious. Me, with a business administration background, working as a garbage collector for Boston. I told him that I had to maintain my pride. I ended up working in the car-wash for three months.

I had to go home on Labour Day weekend. That's when most of the steel-workers go home and I had a chance to get a ride. I had to be home in time to go back to school in Montreal. We got home on Saturday morning after a nine-hour ride. I went to see the teacher-counsellor to find out the situation about the school and if my room and board was ready. He told me that the Department refused to pay for my education. He told me that I had poor marks on my first year. I told him that I really worked hard that year and I didn't understand what had happened. I told him that I attended as many school dances as I possibly could, and I even went as far as to make posters for the dances. I didn't understand why the principal gave me poor marks. I told him that I needed more education because I couldn't get a decent job even in Boston. Finally after a good performance on what education would be to me, he said he would talk to the superintendent. A day later he told me that it was all set for me to go back to Montreal. He made me promise that I wouldn't worry about socializing and that I would study instead.

Off I went to Montreal for my second and final year. This was the year where I would learn how to balance the books. I knew the city pretty well by now. I had moved about five, six times the first year. It was real cool. All I had to say, when I didn't like the boarding place, was that the people didn't understand me. I might even bring in that word that everyone gets all excited about, "discrimination". So, the only thing to do for the poor Indian student who is trying to succeed is to get him another place where he will be understood. (Funny, I'm still looking for that place.) My second year in Montreal was more exciting. I met more people and I visited new places. The people who made me excited were a group of Indian people who kept telling me that "justice for the Canadian Indian has to come, and soon." They were exciting, at times helpful and very often frustrating. They went all out, they wanted to give me advice about everything. They told me that I shouldn't drink milk, because it wasn't good for me. I did stop for a while, because I didn't usually have milk very often. They also told me that liquor didn't agree with Indian people. I guess they meant that Indians shouldn't drink liquor, because nobody agrees with liquor when taken too much. They also told me that because I was born a Catholic I might not have a chance. I asked what chance they were talking about. They meant a chance in life. But seeing that I agreed with them a little more than some people did, they said I still might have a chance, especially because I was an Indian.

They showed me how to write letters to the editor criticizing almost every article that appeared in newspapers about Indians. The more I got involved with these people, the more I began to involve myself with the Indian situation. I started to think about the people back home on the reserve. I analyzed the situation, life on the reserve. I wanted to look back and find what kind of life I had lived and what I went through to get me where I am today. I started to ask questions to myself, What was the role of the church on the reserve? Was the church involved with the Indian too much? Was the church only concerned with God? Were they trying to interfere in Indian politics? I asked myself about the band council. Were they getting the proper assistance from the authorities? Were they having serious problems in the reserve? Were they doing their best? Were they being influenced

by the church and the government? Was the influence, if any, good for the Indian? What am I doing? What am I doing to help? Could I help? Should I help? Would I be giving the right kind of help? The important question that came to me was would the people accept any help from a young man?

At the end of the school year I made up my mind to stop asking myself these questions and go home and find some of the answers and I decided to start a newspaper. I got home about two months before the election of the Chief and council. This was a good time for me to start the paper. I made a deal with one of the men who was running for Chief that I would help him campaign, if he would help me start a paper. He agreed.

After the deal was all set, I found out I would need a typewriter, printing paper and money to print the paper. The parish priest offered to let me use his printing machine after I explained what I wanted to do. The first thing I noticed about elections at home was that very few people showed any interest in them. So I decided to write my first editorial trying to explain to the people what the election meant and how important it was for the people to be concerned. I offered space for anybody who might want to write a campaign letter to the people. I did get quite a few letters. When the first issue came out, it took quite a while for me to convince people that it was really worth a dime. Most of the people just brought it and laughed. I had figured on this so I only printed a hundred issues, but I sold every one of them and I had a hard time keeping the original for my files. By this time people started to show their interest in the election. There were a lot of issues involved: education, roads, recreation, and new projects for employment for the men. Meanwhile, I had promised this guy that I would try to help him to campaign. After a couple of days, he wouldn't listen to what I was saying. Not that I had all the answers, but I did suggest that if he appeared on TV as he had planned, it wouldn't be good. I told him that was a white way of running a campaign and it wouldn't work with the Indian people. He kept telling me about the progressive world and that the Indians have the same tactics and ideas on politics as the white-people. I told him again not to appear on TV but he did. So I pulled out. I didn't go for mixing Indian politics with white politics because it just doesn't work. After going all out with

his money and appearing on TV, he lost the election by a wide majority.

I went on working with my paper, writing about the school situation. Some Indian people claimed that the school board was trying to push the Indian children to take only trades, such as welding, carpentry, and mechanics. I knew some of the kids could go on to higher education if they had a chance and a break. So I wrote articles criticizing the school board. The councillors somehow got the point and started to fight. The battle between the school board and the council had been going on for years. The problem was that they wouldn't let an Indian on the board. The excuse was that the Indian wasn't paying any taxes and didn't really own any land. Today the children are going to Campbellton, N.B. which is in a different province from the reserve, and they are getting a better chance to succeed in school. And the Indian people finally got proper representation on the school board.

My paper lasted about a year. Seeing that profit wasn't my bag, I couldn't make any. I decided to try to preserve the paper and I asked my sister if she could take care of it for a while. I guess she tried but it was hard for her to get help and I guess she brought out two issues. Meanwhile, I went to Boston to work and try to make enough money and maybe to go back to the paper. Some people said they missed it, some said they were glad it was gone. I think one guy attempted to start his own and quit after one issue. But I had done what I wanted to do — stir up the people, get them involved in all the situations. The band council have taken over the battle and are doing a good job.

Canadian Indian Workshop

I worked in Boston for six months. I used to laugh at how some people were so ignorant about Canada and the Indian people. I told one guy that I didn't have to work — I could go back to Canada and relax in the sun and eat moose steaks. One thing that used to get them was that I couldn't be drafted, at least I said I couldn't be. One day, I got fed up. Machines started to turn me off as I turned them on. I walked over to my boss and told him that I was quitting. He didn't believe me. He said that I couldn't leave a good job like that and forget about the bright future that was involved. I took a look at him and I said to myself,

man if he's the example of my bright future, he can have it all, my part of it anyway. I had other ideas. Such as go to Nova Scotia where all my relatives are and visit for a while. I always wanted to go to Nova Scotia anyway. So I quit my job and left for Nova Scotia, not knowing what I would be doing after that. I didn't worry. I guess I must have stayed up there for about three or four weeks until one day I heard about a scholarship. It was a deal where one could apply and if accepted would attend the University of British Columbia. It was called a Canadian Indian Workshop. I had never seen Vancouver and I hadn't even gone beyond Ottawa, Ontario. I knew I had a small chance. When a co-ordinator for the course phoned from B.C. to tell me that I was accepted, was I ever glad!

By this time I had spent every last penny I had earned in Boston. I didn't even have to ask the relatives in Nova Scotia for money. They knew I was flat, so they gathered what money they could find and gave me twenty dollars. I was very happy. I could see that the people were trying real hard to help me to get to Vancouver. They, too, had never seen B.C. and I guess they wanted someone to see it and to tell them what it's all about. But I never did have a chance to go back to Nova Scotia. I found out that I would have to travel by plane, and this scared me a little. This would be my first plane ride. After travelling by car and bus I got to the airport. I picked up my tickets and only had to wait about an hour. Then I heard my flight number on the loudspeaker and I went to the gate, and there it was, the huge monster I had to board to go to Vancouver. I almost changed my mind. I was ready to turn back when I remembered how the people helped me to get to the airport and I didn't want to let them down. So I inhaled and said to myself, there's always the first time, and I got on the plane. The plane took off at 6 a.m. in the morning and arrived in Vancouver at 11:30 a.m. Vancouver time. I said to myself, it only took five and a half hours to travel four thousand miles. Later, I found out that I had to add four more hours because of change of time. So it really took us nine and a half hours on the plane. I arrived in Vancouver airport with a dollar in my pocket for I had spent nineteen on bus fare and taxi. I didn't know where the workshop was going to be held. I wasn't sure if it was Simon Fraser U. or University of British

Columbia. I had been given a number to phone and I did, but no one answered, and I didn't know what to do. I only had a dollar in my pocket and it was Sunday. I figured that there might not be anyone at the University. I remembered a phone number one of my Nova Scotia aunts had given me, a number that belonged to her sister who was living at the time in New Westminster, B.C., fifteen miles from the airport. I took a look at my dollar and I took a look at my phone number. I heard funny noises coming from my stomach. I was hungry, I was tired, and I needed sleep. I got enough courage together to phone my aunt. I had only seen her once and I was scared that she might just ask who the hell was I? I phoned and I was surprised when she got so happy to hear from me and told me to go right over. The only dollar in my pocket didn't allow me to go in a taxi. Now if you haven't travelled from Vancouver airport to New Westminster on a city bus, let me tell you don't try it. It took me one and a half hours. I was tired like old hell but I forgot all about my tiredness when I was welcomed by a beautiful, kind, grey-haired lady. She was so happy to see me. We spent another two hours talking about the folks down in the Maritimes. After that she told me to rest and I must have slept for about twenty hours. I wasn't used to the time change and besides I was tired.

The next day I spent my time making phone calls to find out which university the workshop would be held. I finally got in touch with the co-ordinator of the workshop and I was picked up and taken to the University of British Columbia. Later on, I was introduced to the rest of the Indian students who were participating in the workshop, about seventeen beautiful girls and ten boys, their ages from seventeen to twenty-eight. I was introduced as a Micmac from Nova Scotia. I didn't mind although I was from Quebec.

The workshop consisted of a course on Anthropology and Sociology with three professors from the United States giving lectures on the two main courses. We had guests from different parts of Canada. I had a real wonderful experience at the workshop. I not only had a chance to meet new friends but I had a chance to find out the feeling about the Indian situation from different Indian people from other provinces. We discussed new ideas and tried to find the solutions, if any, to what

some people call the Indian problem. The course was a very valuable experience for me. It was wonderful at times, because we had a great time but it was frustrating. The simple reason is, you just don't put twenty-seven radical-minded young Indian people in a room for six weeks and not expect arguments. When we found out some of the problems and we had so many different solutions, we were frustrated. One important thing we all felt was that we were somehow *united*. We did everything together. We cried, we laughed, we sang, we danced, and we were happy. It was sad to see each other go our different ways at the end. I guess most of us felt as if we were in a dream. We even thought of starting our own reserve, and living together for a while. But we realized that it wasn't possible. We had to go home and back to our people. Everyone promised that we would meet somewhere and bring back great memories. I guess every one of us got involved in something exciting because we never did meet. Most of the students had ideas of what they were going to do. I made up my mind to join the Company of Young Canadians. I heard about the organization at the workshop.

Company of Young Canadians

After four days on the train from Vancouver, B.C. I arrived in Restigouche, my home. The first thing I did was get in touch with the CYC. I wrote a letter to the director in Ottawa and explained my interest in the Company. After waiting about two weeks for an answer, I got a long distance phone call. They told me I had to be in Toronto on that same weekend. I left Restigouche on a Thursday night and arrived in Montreal the next morning. I had to wait for another train to get me to Toronto and my train was in the afternoon. I phoned up some of my friends in Montreal, and they said they would meet me in town. One guy started telling me his idea of starting a magazine about Indian people. He wanted me to help him. He was telling me all about the Company of Young Canadians, how destructive they were, and how there was no future with them. He told me that they still have to find some money somewhere for the magazine, though, and that didn't agree with me. I had gone through the same situation before and I knew what it was like. I just didn't feel like facing it again. I knew if I joined the CYC there would

be money, and I would not have any financial problems for a while. So I decided to go through with the Company. I wouldn't be making too much money but it was a start. My friend told me if I wanted to become a hippie, that was my business. If I wanted to smoke pot that too was my business. I asked him what he was talking about. He told me that if I became a volunteer with the CYC, that would be all I would be doing. I told him I didn't have any intentions of smoking pot or becoming a hippie. He said that's the only people they have in the CYC — they're all dirty, pot-smoking hippies. I told him I would find out for myself.

I couldn't stay long with my friends and anyway we ended up having a big argument on the CYC. They didn't want me to join. And I insisted on finding out why I shouldn't join.

I finally left Montreal and I was glad; I hadn't thought that I would have an argument so soon, not with my friends anyway. I arrived in Toronto that night. It seems as if whenever I go somewhere I don't have any money. I couldn't sleep in the hotel so I went over to my sister's place. I didn't want to bother them but I guess I didn't have any choice for I didn't have enough money to get a room. Anyway, my sister was glad to see me and I explained why I was in Toronto. I told her about the CYC. She told me that she didn't think it was a good idea for me to join. I told myself, here we go again. She had seen so much about the CYC on TV and she told me that I was crazy to become a volunteer with the organization. The more I heard about the CYC the more I was interested in joining.

I had a good rest that night and the next day I dressed up: I put on a tie to go to the CYC office. I walked into the office and everyone looked at me as if I was a private investigator. The rest of the people in the building were dressed in jeans and had long hair and a beard. When I told them who I was, they smiled. What I didn't know was that I didn't have to put on a tie. I was told at the office that we would be leaving Toronto to go outside of the city to attend what the CYC called, "Selection Weekend." This meant that we would spend three or four days talking to the director and some other volunteers and they would decide who was capable of becoming a volunteer. Someone remarked that if you're an Indian you automatically made it: what you do is you

talk your head off criticizing the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development; you say things like the government is not just with the Indian people, or maybe the Indian Act is discriminating. Well, you know, you say what they want to hear, and before you know it you're a volunteer.

So I was a volunteer. I wasn't too surprised for I guess I believed what one guy had said about an Indian you were automatically a volunteer. We were told that we would have to attend another happening called, "Orientation Week." I don't know where they get all those names. This would be spending a week somewhere finding out about CYC projects. After studying different projects, you had a chance to choose what you were interested in. I couldn't find any so the director told me to write down what I wanted to do as a volunteer. I told them I wanted to travel across Canada. I wanted to study and evaluate the different projects that were located only on the reserves. They told me to go ahead.

The volunteers were trying to do something. I guess that's enough. I didn't think too much of some of the projects, because some of the volunteers spent their time dreaming. They were dreaming about a world where there was peace, love and understanding. I don't remember running into a place like that. Some of the people didn't understand what the Indian situation was. They did admit that there was something wrong, but instead of doing something, they spent all their time admiring people who were poor. They claimed that there was love and understanding among poor people. I don't know about that. Too many volunteers had the impression that all they had to do was run into an Indian reserve and ask the first person they meet if the people needed help.

If the Company has any further plans of having any more projects in the Indian reserves I think they should do a really careful job selecting people who will be in those projects. They should train those people so that they are prepared to face any situation. The volunteers should learn about the Indian, and be prepared to respect his way of life.

After travelling for the CYC I went back to my reserve to teach up-grading to the Indian parents. I also had some plans

of starting the paper again. When I got back home I found out that a new parish priest had taken over. He had heard about the paper. He also heard about the articles I used to write about the church and he didn't think it was a good idea to use his printing press for someone else to criticize his work.

I taught up-grading for about three months and one day I received a phone call from the CYC in Ottawa. I was told that I was chosen to be a member of a NFB film crew. The idea was to train Indians to be film makers, and to make films on Indians. Seven of us were trained for six weeks, intensive training on camera, sound lighting, editing, directing and producing. After six weeks each of us went to special fields; I, for example, took film-editing. I guess I must have stayed with the Film Board for six months. One day I got fed up with the whole thing. I thought the Board was to train us to be film makers. I figured when someone makes a film, the whole purpose is to show both sides of the facts involving the situation. But that wasn't the way the Film Board saw it. They wanted us to just criticize the white man and especially the Department of Indian Affairs. I know the Indian Affairs Branch hasn't been perfect, but facts are facts and they have to be shown. Their main idea was to be anti-everything and when I attempted to make a couple of proposals, I guess they didn't meet any of the Film Board ideas. The last month with the film crew was frustrating for me and probably for the other members too. We could'nt seem to see eye to eye. I decided to leave the film crew and go to Toronto and try to enroll in an university. I resigned from the film crew and I was told that I had to resign from the CYC if I was going to have my way paid to Toronto. So I resigned from CYC and still they wouldn't pay my way to Toronto. Finally one of the instructors gave me enough money to get me to Toronto. I had a little chance there because I have a sister and a nephew up there.

I arranged to write entrance exams at York University but I would have to wait about three weeks and I was broke. I had applied for a job with the CBC but I would have had to wait till the end of August which was a little over three weeks away. I decided to leave Toronto and get to the United States where I had a better chance. There is more employment in Boston. I had to borrow the money to get me to the States and I finally

got some and left. Meanwhile, I was thinking about the CYC and I got angrier the more I thought of the way they left me stranded with no money. I got to Boston and I found a job as a roofer. I would have found a better job if I had time but I had to pay back the people I owed money to. To make things worse, I had a fight with my boss at the roofing company and he fired me after three weeks. I guess I was glad he did because I was sick of carrying tar and gravel every day. Then, to make things better I got a letter from York University saying that I had to be in Toronto to do the exams. And guess what — yes, I was broke again. I have been frustrated before but that day, in Boston, I was the saddest, most miserable person in the State of Massachusetts.

After three days of searching for dough to get me to Toronto, I went to a church, asking for assistance. I explained my situation, and I was told to go to an organization that could help me. I went to see a woman who was supposed to be able to help. Again I had to explain my situation, and after two hours I had her convinced that I did need the money for my fare to Toronto. She told me that she was going to give me the money to go to Toronto, but I had to promise that I wouldn't go back to Boston to end up in the same situation. I gladly promised I wouldn't. I had to sneak out of my room because I owed three days rent. I said the good Lord knows the story and I don't think he'd mind if I don't pay the three days' rent. After a day and a half on the bus I arrived back in Toronto.

I went to see my nephew at one of the hotels in Toronto. He was working at one of the car-washes on Bay Street. He would go to one of the hotels for a relaxing evening, so I knew where to find him. I wanted to be with him for a while because he's a good man to talk to when you're broke. He bought me a couple of drinks and we talked. I really enjoyed being with him because I liked the way he was trying to convince me that life wasn't really all that bad. I'm sure he knew more about it than I did. He is much older than I. I told him I didn't feel like going over to my sister's and he said he would find me a place to sleep for a dollar a night. He's a regular customer with the Sally Ann's outfit. I appreciated what he was trying to do: he didn't have much to offer me, but he gave me all he had. We went over to the

Salvation Army at 10 o'clock at night, that's when everyone had to be in. He whispered to me after we got in to tie my shoes around my neck. I asked him what in the world was he talking about. He told me not to ask questions just do what he said, if I wanted to walk around with shoes the next day.

The next day I went to do my test at York, and then I decided to go home. I was thinking about my family back on the reserve. My father was sick and he kept coming back to my mind. I was still broke then, so I had heard about the Traveller's Aid and I went to see them, and they told me they couldn't help me. They said seeing that I was an Indian why didn't I go to Indian Affairs, so I did. I don't know what kept me going — perhaps my nephew did. I remember him telling me that he didn't have a chance to be anyone, and I had a chance so he told me to take it. I still say he's the greatest.

I went to the Indian Affairs but I had a very funny feeling. The feeling you get when you have to go and beg for something, a feeling that I had to play a role. I didn't think too much of myself then and my morale was the lowest part of me. I guess I never in a long time ever went so low, as having to go and bum my way home. My whole attitude changed when I met a fantastic lady there; she told me stories and jokes. She really made me feel wonderful. She asked me if I was hungry and I said I was, so she gave me her sandwich and a hard-boiled egg. She knew I was hungry and I apologized and said I had been on a diet. I was satisfied with what I had put in my stomach.

They gave me a ticket to go home on the train that evening. I didn't feel too bad now that I had a ticket back to the reserve. I can remember going back to the reserve a couple of times before because I couldn't make it in the city.

Finally I was on my way home. I arrived home Friday morning; I saw my father sitting on the porch of the house, and he didn't look too good. I didn't go to speak to him and I really don't know why. To this day I keep thinking to myself that it would have been so easy for me to have just gone over to him and asked how he was. I will never know now how he felt that day because he died that same week-end, between late Saturday and early Sunday morning.