

Part 1

Chapter 1

“Come on dad, wake up...we’re landing!” Chiara shouted shaking her father, a big and stout man who was sleeping soundly with his head pressed against the back of the seat.

“Is that true? Are we really landing?” Chiara’s 8-year-old brother Matteo asked, looking up from his paper.

“Of course we are! Look, the “fasten-your-seatbelt” sign has gone on already!” Chiara replied, whilst a stewardess hummed some unintelligible words in the loudspeaker.

“What’s the matter now?” The father stammered opening his eyes and looking around.

“Fasten your seatbelt, dad, we’re landing!”

“...Sure, my...my seabelt.”

A tall, dark-haired stewardess walked to their seats and said smiling: “We’ll be landing in a few minutes, Sir!”

“A few minutes?! The man mumbled: “A few minutes...and I have no idea of what I’m supposed to say to my sister-in-law...”

He sighed, then wiped his flushing face and outstanding dark moustache.

“Look dad, down there are the airport’s lights!” Matteo shouted looking out of the window.

“What are we supposed to say to the...*Indian* lady?” the man asked Chiara.

He had been dreaming about this memorable journey to Canada for years and was really longing to see his only brother Luigi, who was a couple of years younger than himself, who one day had left for Quebec for working purposes. In fact Luigi’s company imported timber to Italy and as he had arrived in Canada, he had immediately fallen in love with the place, had found a wife of Native-American origins and had set up house. He had not come back to Italy ever since, even though during their long Christmas – and Easter phone conversations, he always promised he would fly over someday, just to introduce them to his wife and daughter.

However, it was then Ernesto who thought to himself one day: “Well, on the 15th of August, I’m going to fly over there with the kids and spend our mid-August holidays with my brother. Wait and see, little Luigi!”

No sooner said than done. They really left. However now, the idea of meeting an “*Indian*” woman in a few minutes was making his few hairs so itchy!

“Just say something like *Je suis enchanté de vous connaître!*” Chiara replied, but then, slightly doubtful she added “Maybe...maybe we’d better be more informal. We belong to the same family after all. You’d better say simply *enchanté!*”.

“Anshanté!” The man muttered. “What’s her name again?”

“Kateri Widduk, called Wild Duck, but just call her Kateri...”

In that precise moment, the airplane touched ground with a bump, accompanied by a bursting applause by all passengers.

“They were scared enough, weren’t they?!” The man said in a laugh.

“You shut up! What if they heard you?!” Chiara whispered, busy with bags and rucksacks. “What about you Matteo? Could you please put your papers down and help me with all this stuff?!”

They slowly stepped off the plane with all their bags, sacks and raincoats and being stunned with the long flight, walked along the vast landing strip of Montreal Airport.

“I really hope little Luigi is here to pick us up...or how else are we getting to Quebec?” The man stammered, looking around with some anxiety.

“Come on, dad, we’d better follow the rest of the group” Chiara suggested.

Pushed forward and tossed by the crowd, they finally reached the indoor airport area, where Matteo was immediately attracted by the silent-sliding conveyer belt.

“Our bags are there too, aren’t they!” the boy shouted, as he saw their luggage running through. They all ran to the belt and picked them up, whilst Matteo could not help but lay his papers on it, just to watch them pass by.

“Are you coming at last?!” Chiara scolded him. Matteo followed her to the gate, where a few policemen were about to check passengers’ passports. Suddenly he shivered, as he saw a huge Alsatian dog kept on the lead, by a policeman. The big animal had stopped just beside him and now was scrupulously sniffing his sack. Matteo instinctively moved close to Chiara and took her hand, whilst another Alsatian dog looked very eager to sink its teeth into their father’s case.

“Don’t worry, they’re just searching for drugs” Chiara tried to reassure him.

“Wow! like in movies?” Matteo asked, now showing great interest in the two dogs’ moves.

“I hope they won’t smell the salami in dad’s suitcase!” Chiara laughed, trying to hide her own concern. Thank God the two dogs walked away. They started following a man who was dressed in the Eastern fashion and started to fluster about his large dark case.

The family made it through the check-point without any trouble and walked towards the exit, looking for their relatives. Suddenly they heard someone shouting from the small crowd of people standing behind the barrier: “Ernesto! Ernesto! We’re here!”. Luigi made his way through, waving his arms in happiness, followed by a thin dark-haired lady and a little blonde girl.

“Luigino!” Ernesto shouted, running in their direction with eyes full of tears. He dropped his luggage and hugged his brother warmly. *Luigino* was as big a man as

Ernesto and his hair had already started to turn grey. After the warm embrace, he turned to his wife and daughter who were waiting behind him in silence.

“My name’s Kateri, I’m your sister-in-law and this is Valentina.” She said in Italian, moving a few steps forward; then she smiled beautifully, and her skinny face brightened.

Also Valentina, a fine-boned girl with large green-blue eyes, smiled joyfully, showing her irregular teeth caught in braces. Without a word, she took Matteo by the hand and headed for the way out, whilst the two brothers were still asking each other so many questions, not giving the other the time to answer.

“Thank God she speaks Italian...” Chiara thought to herself with some relief, then she walked after Kateri, who was kindly carrying the girl’s bags.

“You must be exhausted...after such a long journey!” Luigi commented: “I’m going to drive you home now, just in time for dinner!”

“Dinner? Now? What’s the time now?” Matteo asked doubtfully looking in Chiara’s direction : “We’ve already had our dinner...”

“It’s because of the jet-lag darling, later I’ll tell you about this...” Chiara answered embarrassed.

Luigi led them to his huge brick-red coloured car, where everybody took their place; Ernesto in the front with Kateri and the three kids in the back. The big car wriggled easily in a crowd of vehicles, running through passages and over shiny-steel bridges which overlooked immense water mirrors.

“Business is going well I guess, isn’t it?” Ernesto smiled to his brother admiring his luxury car.

“Well, what can I say...It’s not bad, not bad at all!” Luigi replied with satisfaction:

“My company’s getting bigger and bigger and Kateri’s got a very good job as well...”

Matteo, who was sitting beside Chiara, nudged her and whispered, pointing at Valentina “Look at her, she isn’t red-skinned at all!”

“You shut up!” Chiara warned him and withered him with a glance.

“Why this?” Matteo asked.

Kateri, who had been listening in silence, sitting between the two men, turned back and explained in fluent Italian: “Even though we are commonly called *Redskin* , our skin colour is not at all red; the truth is that my people used to paint their faces during ceremonies.”

Chiara blushed with shame and Valentina exclaimed cheerfully “I am blonde, you see?”. She laughed, then thought about her dental braces and shut her mouth immediately, pressing both hands against it.

The car was racing on the smooth tarmac in very heavy, yet somehow, *relaxing* traffic. To their side, the big river was flowing on and a red sunset was falling on maple woods, whilst the buildings were fewer and fewer, as they proceeded out of town.

Chiara leaned her head against the comfortable headrest and let her eyes run through the passing landscape: bridges with French names rising high above the river, a soaring tower with a light-blue- and- golden flag on top, green meadows filled with

grazing horses, black bushes, a flight of seagulls above the water which was being darkened by the forthcoming night, more bridges...

It was in this sort of sweet drowsiness that she arrived at Luigi's wooden cottage, which was well protected by the greenness of a shadowed garden.

Under the rustic veranda, stood a five- or six-year-old boy with a tiny round face and a dark-haired fringe covering a pair of slanting eyes, who timidly stepped forward, holding a huge Samoyed by the collar. The dog, which had a white and thick haired coat, first barked enthusiastically, then simply observed the newcomers and wagged its tail with gleaming eyes and a *smiling* muzzle.

After getting out of the car, Valentina led Matteo to the little boy "This is Babik, Babik La Boule." She said without hesitating; then she walked in the house and straight into a wide kitchen... "On va manger!" She announced enthusiastically. She sat down at a long sumptuously laid table and made some room for Matteo to sit by her side. The little boy took place on her other side without speaking, whilst the dog, that had followed them, lied comfortably behind the chairs waiting patiently.

"I... I don't really feel like eating..." Chiara murmured when everyone was already in the kitchen. She felt confused, and suddenly sick at the sight of food.

"Are you feeling sick?" Her father worried.

"No, I'm just so tired..."

"It must be due to the long flight and to the jet-lag." Luigi remarked, "You'd better go to bed now; get some sleep, I'm sure you'll be ok tomorrow!"

"Please come, your room is ready!" Kateri suggested, leading Chiara to a clean and tiny room furnished with light-wooden pieces. She helped her take off her clothes and snuggle down under the blankets like a mother would do, whilst Chiara curled up like a baby.

Wrapped in fresh and clean sheets, after whispering the last "thank you", she fell sound asleep.

"She was really exhausted" Kateri thought to herself, looking at the girl with tenderness. Then she slipped out of the room and walked to the kitchen, where everyone was talking lively, eager to eat up the lavish meal.

"Here is our superb cook!" Luigi welcomed her warmly and Kateri served the soup.

Chapter 2

When Chiara woke up, the sun was already high and her room was pervaded by a radiant light. She took a look around and felt confused: golden-maple furniture matching perfectly the floor shade, a wooden crucifix over the bed and hanging on the wall, a big picture of Kateri and Valentina. Mother and daughter were wearing traditional Native – American costumes adorned with beads and feathers and behind them, one could see a peculiar knife having a bear mandible-shaped handle and a buckskin quiver, which was decorated with beautiful geometrical patterns...

“Wow, I’m in Canada!” she exulted, jumping off the bed. She went to the window, drew back the curtains and looked out: a rich garden, lots of ancient trees, a riot of twittering birds on the branches, swishing waters and not far from the house, a fenced green meadow and the fronds of a big tree pattering against the window panes. When Chiara opened the window, she noticed a furtive squirrel which was staring at her from inside a hollow trunk.

“Hello, there!” She joked.

At the sound of her voice, the animal’s furry tail quivered and in a flash, it disappeared among the leafy branches.

“It’s so nice over here!” She exclaimed, moving away from the window. She put on a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt that she had randomly fished out from her bag and thought cheerfully: “Thank God my strict and tidy mum didn’t see this!”.

Then she went to the tiny bathroom and washed her face with fresh water, gathered up her dark hair in a plait, and went outside. In the garden she enjoyed the fresh morning air. By following the fragrance trail of coffee, hot milk, and freshly-baked cakes, she easily made her way to the kitchen: everybody was already around at the big table. Her father and Luigi were engaged in a very animated conversation, while a quick and silent Kateri served them warm croissants, toasted bread, hot coffee, some milk and maple jam.

Seeing Chiara come in, she smiled “Good morning! Did you sleep well? If so, you must be really hungry now !”

“Well, to be honest...I’m starving!” Chiara exclaimed, and sat down beside Matteo. He moved closer to her as if he had important secrets to share “You know, I slept in a bunk bed with Valentina and Babik!” he said and pointed at the Eskimo boy who was staring at Chiara and hiding behind a huge mug of porridge. He had a wisp of straight hair on top of his round-shaped head.

As he heard the calling of his name, he opened his mouth in a wide smile, showing two little holes where his upper incisors should be, whilst his rose-coloured cheeks exalted in his potato-coloured face.

“Babik is my brother...I mean, he’s going to be my brother for some time...”
Valentina explained.

“Your brother...for some time?” Chiara repeated, trying to understand.

“Hey, there you are!” Her father exclaimed when he finally noticed her. He then plunged again into conversation with his brother. “Do you remember Gianfranco Argenti?...Come on, the skinny one with lots of sisters!” Luigi asked him.

“Is he the one who worked as a builder?”

“Sure! Right that one! He settled in Canada too and lives in Montreal now. He started a business in the flooring sector specializing in industrial building, you know.” Luigi continued “His sisters moved over here too, married local men and are now working all together in Gianfranco’s company. Believe me, they produce castings of concrete for half of Canada and have great projects. In fact, they’re planning to create a vast industrial complex by the St Lawrence...”

“Don’t talk nonsense!”

In that precise moment, the white Samoyed appeared on the door with its coat shining in the morning light. Its tongue was dangling, as if it had been running miles and miles. “Asa!” Babik shouted jumping off the chair and running towards the dog. The animal stood on its hind legs, pressed its front paws against the child’s shoulders and soon the two of them started rolling on the floor, laughing and moaning in a tangled skein of paws and feet which Kateri looked at with smiling indulgence for some time. However, as soon as she had enough of the frenzy, the woman pronounced a few words in an unknown, guttural language, which caused both the boy and dog to calm down in a few seconds. Babik shook off the dog’s hairs and ran straight to the sink to wash his hands, while Asa curled up on the doorstep and started staring at the group of people around the table, wagging his tail now and then.

Kateri took Babik by the hand, led him to his chair, sat down beside him and tied the bib around his neck; then she said something to Valentina, joined her hands and began saying something that sounded like a prayer.

“Kateri was brought up by the Quakers, therefore she’s very religious” Luigi explained after making the sign of the cross. Then, pointing at a young Indian woman who stood out in a hanging picture, he continued “That woman is an ancestress of hers, named Kateri Tekekwitka. She died in 1600, when she was only 24 and was said to be a Saint. After her death, she was beatified by the Roman Pope, can you believe this?”

“Come on, let’s eat now!” Kateri said in a very calm voice and they all devoted themselves to the food.

Outside, the sun was shining in the fountain that spouted in the middle of the garden and flights of shrilled seagulls were flying in the clear sky.

“I’d really like to show you my company, if you feel like it”. Luigi told his brother, who in the meantime, was about to devour all the *pastrami* toasts that Kateri had served him. “If we take the motorway, we’ll be there in about an hour”.

“An hour?!” Ernesto wondered.

Luigi laughed.

“An hour’s drive is nothing in such a boundless country as this!” He explained.

“Well, it’s an excellent idea!” Ernesto answered enthusiastically. Then, however, his face darkened and he cast Chiara a questioning glance. “But... what about them? What are they going to do in the meantime?” He asked.

“They can join me...if they like” Kateri kindly suggested.

“Kateri runs a school in the Reservation.” Luigi explained proudly. “She’s the one who takes care of all the problems and issues concerning Native Americans.”

“Oh yes, please! We want to go with Kateri!” Chiara exclaimed. She was so excited with the idea of visiting a Reservation...she had been watching lots of films about Native Americans and now she was dying to meet them in the flesh!

The two men stood up cheerfully, went outside, side by side and disappeared behind the house, followed by Asa. A couple of minutes later, the rumble of Luigi’s big car broke the morning peace and quickly vanished in the distance.

Chiara helped Kateri in the kitchen, while Valentina talked to Matteo in a despotic tone “Maman is driving us to school. Go and get changed!”

“To school?! What school?...I’m still on holiday!” The child protested.

Chapter 3

While Kateri drove her old station wagon out of the garage, Babik tried to clasp Asa's collar. The dog was sitting under a big maple tree leaning its muzzle against the boy's shoulder and whenever Babik talked in its furry ear, the dog seemed to be nodding in agreement.

"Asa is not allowed to come with us. When he comes to the Reservation, he fights with the other dogs all the time." Valentina explained to Matteo.

A few minutes later they all crowded into the car. Valentina, Matteo and Babik sat in the back and Chiara in the front, next to Kateri. When the woman started up the car and made the tyres squeal, Asa went into a huff and began to bark.

"Tonight I'm going to cook a tasty fish soup for you, dog!" Kateri promised in a laugh, and Asa wagged his tail to show his approval.

"Is he an Eskimo dog?" Chiara asked.

Kateri nodded "I took him home with us, because I feared that Babik might miss his own people too much."

Having said that, she gave the boy a loving glance from the rear-view mirror and translated the conversation into the Eskimo language. Babik laughed warmly.

"Babik really loves his country and his people" Kateri continued "To them, the North means everything, it's called *Nuna Kittinga*, the Centre of the Earth, and *Kalaski*, the Belly Button of the World."

Suddenly she fell silent and looked thoughtful; she was very concentrated on driving and controlled the car with great ability on the big and sunny road along the St. Lawrence. Chiara, sitting quietly beside her, dared not to break the silence.

"Babik will be an *inuk*, a true man and won't do without the North." Kateri sighed shortly afterwards.

"Why is he living with you now?" Chiara asked.

"Babik's mother and father were off for the hunting season last spring, but suddenly they disappeared from the usual hunting tracks and were therefore reported missing."

"And what about Babik?"

"Babik had been left at the village with his grandparents... very old people old, you know so the Social Affairs decided to leave him with me, whilst waiting for further news about his parents. If they are back someday, he'll have a chance to chose between staying here and going to my school, or going back to his family and people."

Chiara was impressed. She gazed at the landscape in front of her, but couldn't see anything. Her mind was deeply captured by the image of a horse-drawn sledge, with two muffled shadows fading away in the white loneliness of a snowstorm.

She collected herself with a long shiver: "Do you think they'll ever be back?" She whispered. Kateri nodded with decision: "I'm absolutely sure they will! They must have moved further north to hunt bears, but they'll be back."

Nobody talked for some time, then Kateri smiled and said to Matteo: “In a few minutes you’re going to see a true Native- American Reservation, can you believe it?”

“Wow! And am I going to meet some *redskins* saying “how”, smoking the peace pipe and performing the war dance?” Matteo replied, in a state of real excitement.

“ This is something you can find only in American movies.” Kateri answered with a smile. Then, addressing Chiara, she added in a sad tone “In real life, most Native Americans are just poor people, I’m afraid.”

After leaving the motorway, and crossing a very long bridge, they started driving inland, following a road that apparently ended up in thick bushes. Chiara was charmed by the beautiful view: An old little cottage with a sloping roof, immersed in a yellow-flower meadow; a sawmill surrounded by stacks of trunks, located in a quiet bend of the river; a farm’s red roof with countless ridges on top; flocks of snow-geese that squealed and fluttered above the marsh; a long bridge...

“It’s so beautiful around here.” She whispered.

“Is it very different from where you live?” Kateri wondered.

“It is definitely very different! Everything is so big over here, so much greener, much brighter...”

“Well, I’m sure your country is beautiful too...Luigi always tells me about it. I wish I could fly over there one day and come and visit your beautiful Romagna!” Kateri promised.

Distracted by talking, they arrived at the Reservation gates sooner than they expected. As they stepped into the village, they were passed by a couple of high and imposing policemen on horseback. One of them greeted Kateri with deference and she nodded in reply.

“She must be a very important person, if even the guards greet her like this!” Chiara thought to herself, while Matteo, who had turned round to watch the guards by the rear window, suddenly shouted : “the Red Coats! These are the Red Coats!”

“No, darling...I’m afraid the Redcoats are only in the West.” Kateri said, causing the child’s disappointment.

Soon they began to glimpse the first village houses behind spots of green. There were only wooden houses, some of which were charming and tidy and others crumbling and surrounded by brushwood.

“Here live the Mohawak, they are my people.”Explained Kateri in a low voice.

Old women wearing the typical Iroquoian dresses, were sitting on the doorsteps.

Even though they certainly noticed the group of visitors pass by, they hardly raised their heads and just went on threading beads together.

By a river bend, young people in blue jeans and t-shirts were working on a boat, watched by a very dark girl who wore a buckskin dress and pretty moccasins adorned with feathers. Hearing the sound of the approaching vehicle, the girl turned round, waved her arm in greeting and ran towards them. Chiara noticed her young and beautiful oval face and her dark hair, which was parted in the middle and tied on both sides with hair-slides decorated with beads.

“Here’s Jade. She’s my assistant at school.” The woman explained.

Kateri slowed down as the girl tried to reach them crossing the meadow with great leaps. When she was close enough, Kateri spoke to her in a graceful language, then accelerated and turned into a square which was dominated by an imposing church. Next to the church was a modern school dedicated to a *Vénérable Kateri Tekakwitka*. They were getting out of the car, when Jade reached them. Together, they went up the school steps and entered a large and bright hall, which was flooded with the light coming through the huge windows. In the middle of the big room, stood the bronze Statue representing the Saint in an Iroquoian dress, with a cross hanging from the necklace, arms straight down, long braids falling on the chest and eyes closed in ecstatic meditation. Shortly later, they were approached by Mademoiselle Constance, a blonde woman in white, who walked towards Kateri and spoke to her in a very agitated French. The only thing that Chiara understood, was that an individual called Aigle Noir had disappeared again and that the lady meant to inform the *Caughnawaga Police Force* about it.

But Kateri said no. She said it peremptorily using her body to stand tall, in order to make her words more effective. Chiara noticed that Jade, who was standing beside Kateri, listened to her words with burning eyes and meanwhile twiddled her fingers. The Italian girl was suddenly very proud to have such a strong and authoritative woman in her family.

“Valentina will be happy to show you the fortress.” Kateri said and walked towards her office, followed by Constance and Jade.

A small crowd, made up mostly of young women with babies in their arms, was waiting by the door and Kateri’s arrival was greeted by collective relief.

“Come on, let’s go!” Valentina said, walking out in the sun. They took the river-side road and met flocks of hungry stray dogs seeking for food leftovers in the dust, while old people sitting on their doorsteps did not seem to care. Some of them simply twiddled their thumbs and stared into space; others kept themselves busy creating traditional souvenirs for tourists.

The fortress, which was a perfect fenced reproduction of an ancient Iroquoian village, was actually full of visitors. Valentina took them in through a resin-smelling-lintel door and they immediately found themselves in the very cradle of an Indian village, surrounded by a circle of decorated-buckskin tepees.

In the middle of the tepees lay the bigger one, that belonged to the Tribe Chieftain and therefore bore the Bear Clan symbols, while the others that surrounded it, belonged to the other family tribes and were significantly smaller and less decorated. “C’est merveilleux!” A skinny tourist exclaimed and took hundreds of pictures of her husband posing as a hero leaning against the tepee posts, or as an excellent hunter placing his foot on a hunting trophy.

Thrilled by this extravagant situation, Matteo was running wild and trotting around the Chief Tepee followed by Valentina and Babik. He shouted: “Chaaaaaarge!!!!!!!!!! Tatatatatatatatatà!!!”

Chiara found it remarkably hard to convince them to walk back to the school and when they finally arrived there, they found the building swarming with people. The girl walked towards one of the doors and glanced inside; a group of young people

was modelling clay vases, under the supervision of a presumably Native-American teacher. Despite typically Native-American features, such as his dark complexion and long straight hair, the man was wearing a fashionable chequered shirt and faded blue-jeans.

Beside this classroom was a little lounge, where some children were sitting on their large mats and painted lively-coloured horses, fish and birds on soft leather strips. Jade, standing beside a girl who had just painted a big sun, looked quickly at Chiara. The girl went to the teacher's desk and wondered at the sight of an Olivetti typewriter. The keys didn't bear letters and numbers but stylized symbols such as a sun, an eye, a wave, a bird and many others, that had also been drawn on a hanging blackboard and equipped with the corresponding caption. Under a buffalo skin, for example, was the word *terre*, and the picture of a big eye was described as *Grand Esprit qui est partout*.

Looking by chance out of the window, Chiara noticed a pair of deep dark eyes staring at her intently and an instant later, made out the rest of a beautiful brown face framed by long dark hair. The face was as motionless as an idol picture and only the bead chain round the forehead seemed to be vibrating.

Chiara felt a long shiver down her spine and turned briskly away, but Jade had her back to her and had obviously missed the scene. Chiara fearfully looked out of the window again...but the unknown face had disappeared.