

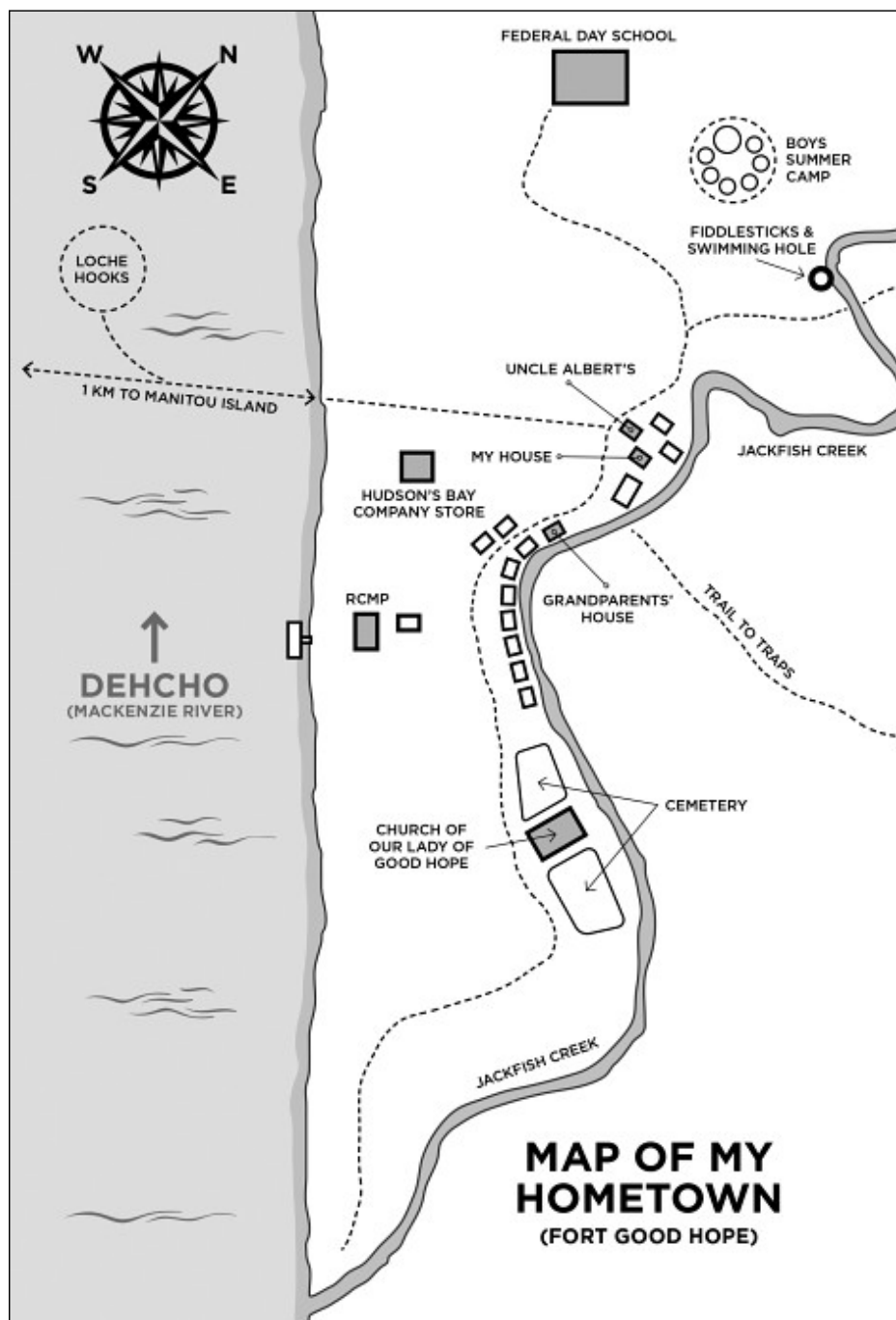
# STONEFACE

A DEFIANT DENE

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# MAP OF FORT GOOD HOPE



# INTRODUCTION

When I was in my mid-twenties, I had a recurring dream where I'd hear the voice of a child crying. I always wondered, Who is that child? Why is he crying? Why does he sound so forlorn, so lonely? It took me years to consider that maybe it was me; maybe it was my voice from some-time during my childhood when I used to cry in my sleep.

I don't know what that voice is, but it's slowly disappearing.

In a way, I've spent the last ten years of my life getting ready to die, trying to find some peace and the ability to be collected and compassionate about what I do and what I see around me. How long does that take, to become centred, at peace with everything around you? Does it take days or months or years? I don't know, but I do know that when it's my time to go, I don't want to go kicking and screaming. I would like to be calm and ready to meet my Maker, meet my ancestors.

I was going crazy with the trauma that I suffered in residential school. Counselling wasn't doing it for me, so I needed to do something myself, and writing down the things in my life, keeping notes about everything, was my therapy. I wrote stories, and I wrote the dates and the years when those things happened. I'm always thinking, Maybe I just dreamt this up. Maybe it didn't happen. Sometimes, the doubt I feel when trying to remember is like the doubt that follows being sexually abused in a dark room. You think afterward, It couldn't have happened.

But I talked to people, people like my brothers, my parents, my uncles and my cousin, and said, "Here's a story that I'd like to tell. Have I got it right or am I making a mistake someplace?" So, all the stories are as accurate as they can be. And what I've learned is that every time you tell your story, you feel that much better. It's almost like every time you tell it, there is a little less pain, anger and hate.

Back in the nineties, when students from residential schools started telling their stories, I said to them, "That's great, I admire you guys for doing it and you should go out and tell everybody." And they came back to me and said, "You do it, too, you tell your story. You're one of our leaders. Why don't you tell your story?"

I didn't want to because I was a public person and I had so little privacy left already. I didn't want to tell people, "Oh yeah, me too. I got sexually abused

when I was nine and when I was a teenager, and this is what they did to me.”

But people kept saying, “You’ve got to tell your story because you *are* a leader. If you feel that our stories must be told, you must go out and tell your story too.” So, I started doing that, and at first, usually two days before the speaking event, I couldn’t sleep. I’d be getting all cramped up and stressed out and by the time it came for me to have a session or talk about my time in residential school, I was physically sick. It does something to you. There’s incredible shame in it; there’s incredible pain in it. Sometimes the pain is so much that people, my friends and colleagues, have killed themselves. They couldn’t live with the pain that comes from being sexually abused as children and then hiding it. Sometimes I’d break down and be angry, and the whole day after telling my story, I’d be violently sick. But then I got defiant about it. I said, “I’m not going to let those bastards get me, whoever they are. I’m going to get better at it.” And so I kept doing it, and I would tell my audience, “I get sick every time I do this and I’m sick of it, so I’m going to keep doing it until I stop getting sick.”

When you start telling it, you hate those people who abused you and you want to kill them. But as you tell it, over and over, you start to become more compassionate. You realize that they were children once; once, they were held by a mother or loved by a father, and something happened to them. Whatever it is, you don’t want to hate them anymore. It’s too much to carry. So, if you can find a way to make a little less hate, anger, pain and suffering in the world, you must do it. You must tell your story.

There are moments in my life that have led me to certain places and sometimes these moments feel like dots, one-time events that have no seeming relevance to anything else in my life. But I know that these dots are connected and I have realized that you cannot see unless you look back. At the same time, you must go forward and follow your instincts, intuition and vision.

I’ve had the extraordinary privilege of serving the Dene Chiefs and the Dene people for so many years of my life. I have also had the honour of serving all the people of the Northwest Territories as premier and as a cabinet minister before that. I travelled the entire North and across Canada time and time again. I have seen the beauty and tried not to blink or flinch at the ugliness. I sometimes found it hard to hear the voices of my people—the youth, the mothers, the fathers, the Elders and the workers—especially in the din of politics with government leaders and officials telling you what they want you to hear, or what they think you want to hear. It’s easy to get lost.

These are sketches, moments of my life. These are stories about the great events that I was part of. They are stories about incredible people who

deserve to be known, named and given recognition. The stories are examples of what we can do when we persevere. As you'll see, I have not always been right or compassionate. I cannot change the past, but I can help show our youth, all young Canadians and Indigenous Peoples of this land, how they should strive to be. In the end I believe that we all shine, although only at certain times.

## SUGHA THE STORYTELLER

One summer, when I was in my twenties and still single, my older cousin Michel said, “We’ve got to go hunting. We’ve got to get some ducks for my family.”

This was the beginning of September and the ducks were starting to fly south for the winter. Even though it was still summer weather in Fort Good Hope, we loaded a snowmobile and a winter toboggan into a twenty-foot flat-bottom plywood boat. It was hard work, but we got it all in and we headed down the Mackenzie River. We had guns and enough food for two or three nights.

On the way downriver we passed four fish camps on the shore; families were living there in canvas tents with their dog teams, setting nets. They were making dry-fish for the winter, for their dogs and themselves and to sell to the Hudson’s Bay Company.

It was good to be outside that day: there was a clear sky and a light wind making small waves on the river. We passed a place on the west side of the Mackenzie River called *Ohn khy feh tlah*, Bird Rock Creek. There were about seven tents. That shoreline is mostly sand sprinkled with gravel and pebbles, and right behind them was a one-hundred-foot-high sloping bank of silt and small rocks. We could see that the camp was busy: there were many dogs and boats, and as we went by that afternoon people were working away and waving at us. We landed a couple of miles below that camp on the shore. We unloaded the snowmobile and the toboggan, and then we took the motor off the boat and pulled it high up on the bank so it would be safe in case the river level went up while we were gone.

We loaded the toboggan with our gear and hooked it up to the snowmobile. Michel started it up and pulled me and everything else up that hundred-foot bank through the dirt and gravel. I had to cover my eyes to protect them from the dust and little rocks flying everywhere. Once we got to the top, we saw an abandoned airstrip and we went along the trail next to it, still driving the snow machine on the dirt, about a mile inland. We had to keep stopping to make sure the snowmobile didn’t overheat.

When we got to the lake, we took out our hunting canoe. We jumped in, paddled out and started shooting ducks. We shot ducks until it got too dark to see, then we headed to a place where there was a little open piece

of shoreline, just enough room for a fire and two people to sleep. It was no more than two or three inches above the water level. It was a perfect little place, and that's where we camped.

When we lay down to sleep, with our eyes almost at water level, this beautiful yellow crescent moon started to rise slowly from behind the trees on the other side of the lake. It was the most beautiful thing. As it appeared, with its reflection mirrored on the surface of the lake, I remember thinking that I had to be the luckiest guy in the world.

The next day, we hunted. As we always did on duck hunting trips, we cut off the birds' wings and plucked them as well as we could, but we had to gut every one of them so they wouldn't spoil.

Late that afternoon, Michel said, "I've got to get back to town, it's getting late." So, we loaded up and went back the same way. We threw the canoe on top of the toboggan, started up the snowmobile and dragged everything back down the trail. I walked behind the toboggan as we made our way down the riverbank, holding the toboggan with a rope so it didn't slide too quickly, and then we loaded everything into the boat and pushed off from shore.

By the time we were on the river it was getting dark, and this time we were going against the current, which was fairly strong. We also had many ducks, so it was slower going than we expected. When we got close to that busy fish camp that we'd passed the day before, we noticed that nobody was there and all the tents were closed, with sticks across the front—except for one little tent where smoke was coming out of the stovepipe. My cousin was in a hurry but said we should check in and see what was going on.

When we got close, we saw a tall older woman, in her sixties or seventies, step out of the tent. It was Elizabeth Grandjambe, a woman everyone called Sughā—that's Dene for *sugar*. She came down to the shore and started talking as soon as we landed.

"Oh, it's so good to see you, my little brothers. I know you went duck hunting. I hope you did okay. Everybody left. I'm the only one here, but it's okay because the dogs are here with me. Everybody ran out of tea and sugar and lard and had to go to town to get supplies, but they left me behind. It's okay, you know, I'm all right by myself."

She goes on and on. "Oh, I'm all alone, I don't have anything, but I'm okay, you know. The weather's not good. They're supposed to have been back this afternoon but the wind was blowing and... Oh, maybe they'll come tomorrow; we'll see about the weather. I think the weather's gonna be bad tomorrow, but it'll be okay. I don't have any tea, I have no sugar, I have no flour, but I've got some fish. Come, have some fish."

It was getting dark and we had to be on our way, but we couldn't say no: it would have been rude to refuse her offer. So, we beached our boat and went up to her tent. She showed us a little bowl and said, "This is leftover flour from the last bannock I made two days ago. I kept it for you guys; it's all I have. I've got no oil, no lard, but I've got fish oil, so I'm going to mix fish oil with the leftover flour and make pancakes for you guys. You can have it with your fish."

"Well, I've got some tea," Michel said. "I got some stuff in the boat, so..."

"Well, it's up to you," she answered—then added, "Go ahead, you know."

Michel and I went back to the boat and put a bag of ducks together for her. Michel took his grub bag (inside was tea, sugar, leftover lard and treats, like the bannock that his wife had made, that were meant for us), and he gave everything to her. She had quite a haul. She made us some tea and then those fish oil pancakes.

Oh my God, that was hard eating, I tell you. Fish oil is ripe, but we had to be respectful so we ate the darn things and then took off. As we cut east across the river, we could clearly see her on the shoreline waving to us. Soon she disappeared into the grey of the evening, and I remember thinking then and for years after that what she did for us was the perfect example of Dene sharing. She had absolutely nothing, and what little she did have—leftover flour and fish oil—she was too eager, too generous to offer. That was as Dene as you can get. I love that memory. For years I would tell that story as an example of what it means to share in the bush.

But one day, when I was older and more aware of her skill as a storyteller, I thought about it again. Did everyone in the camp really pack up and tell Sugha, "We have to go to town to get our supplies, and we'll get your stuff for you, but can you stay"? Would they really leave an older woman on her own with no supplies?

Sugha knew that we were down the river and that we had to come back at some point. The afternoon that we were coming home, she was probably lying in her tent, thinking, When they come, I wonder what kind of story I could tell them...

Did she have any tea, sugar, lard or flour? I don't know. If she did, did she tuck it all away to make up a story? That's a storyteller. Here's Sugha, twenty miles down the Mackenzie River from the closest town. She's all by herself, with nobody around except thirty dogs. She doesn't feel sorry for herself at all, but she still points it out to us: "I'm all alone. There's nobody here. They're supposed to come back, but it's okay, I'm all right, I got the dogs here with me. I have nothing, no tea or sugar, but it's okay. I got some



fish and some leftover stuff, and I can prepare that for you...” We couldn’t possibly say no to that.

Here’s what I think about this story now: Sugha prepared the story of having nothing and sharing the last of her food with these two young guys. As she watched us head home into the greyness of the river, she would have been thinking, Well, they’re happy. I gave them a good story.

That is the essence of a storyteller, and as I was to learn later, Sugha was one of the best. Dorothy Cotchilly, an older woman from Good Hope, once told my mother, “Sugha was born in the mountains and long before she came out of them, word had arrived about her big imagination. People knew that Sugha was a storyteller.”

I can illustrate this with another story about Sugha. In March 2005, I was hanging out at the Gold Range bar writing lyrics and trying out the songs I liked on the guitar. It was Yellowknife’s Caribou Carnival, so people from many communities were in town. Around three o’clock in the afternoon, before the bar got busy, who should come in but Sugha. She was with her daughter, who helped Sugha travel from Good Hope so she could have something done with her legs at Yellowknife’s hospital. She was moving slowly with the help of a walker. She could barely walk—that’s an important detail to remember. For some reason, the staff at the Gold Range decided, “Now this is a special lady. We’re going to give her the royal treatment.” They gave her the best table: two back from the stage, dead centre. The staff made sure she had all the beer she wanted and she sat there for the whole afternoon.

Now by four o’clock, the jam session had started and the Gold Range was packed. There were incredible musicians there, like Charlie Furlong from Aklavik and Angus Beaulieu, the famous fiddler from Fort Resolution. It was awesome music.

I was approached by Therese Pierrot, a lady in her seventies who was not even five feet tall, from Good Hope. In Dene, she said, “*Say shillay dalay whee-tlay.*” My little brother, let’s go dance with everybody else.

So off we went, and we danced maybe two or three songs until the dance floor got so packed that it was too hard to see her. We sat down, and while she smiled and caught her breath Therese told me how much she enjoyed it, how it made her feel young. And of course, I caught Sugha sitting there smiling from ear to ear. She saw how much we enjoyed ourselves.

That summer I went back to Good Hope for the Wood Block Music Festival. It was called that because chairs were scarce and people would sit on their chopping blocks. The whole community was gathered out in the field having a big cookout. I was greeting and shaking hands with people I

hadn't seen for a while. I walked by a table of grandmothers and Therese was there. She yelled out to me, "Hey, Little Brother, remember when we were dancing at the Gold Range? It's such a happy memory for me!"

Then I hear Sugha, sitting at the next table, say, "Yeah, me too, I remember the good time we had, me and my little brother dancing at the Gold Range."

That was Sugha's way of creating a story. It wasn't true, but she threw it in there anyway. She'd look you straight in the eye and dare you to call bullshit, you know? You see, Dene storytelling has always been an important part of our culture. During the long, dark nights of winter, when it's cold and people are hungry or grieving, storytelling was given high regard because that's all there was to do. Storytelling is an essential part of our lives, as necessary as sleeping or eating.

I think that when Christianity came to our people, the priests started saying, "Thou shall not tell lies. If it is not true, then it is a lie and you are a liar." That really changed things for storytellers. *Liar* in Dene is *Goh-tsi*, one who lies. The best storytellers would hear somebody say something and then build on it and change the story. They'd catch it in mid-air and say, "Ah, yes, that reminds me of the time when..."

Rene Fumoleau was the Catholic priest in Good Hope when I was growing up. He took many photos of the Dene and wrote a book called *As Long as This Land Shall Last*. I think he understood the Dene because he once said to me, with a smile, "If I tell a story, then it must be true." I think he did something to redeem what the Catholic Church did, at least in Good Hope, which was to label storytellers as liars.

After Sugha passed on to the Spirit World, one of her sons told me he was not happy with the way some people had treated his mother. I was surprised to hear him say that, so I told him, "I liked your mother. People liked your mother, you know. She told stories, and there was never a time when you heard that Sugha is down or Sugha needs to be cheered up. She was the one who was always positive and cheering other people up. That's what I remember about her. I respect your mum. She's a part of the circle of Elders that we have."

I have thought a lot about what Sugha's son said to me, and it's one of the reasons why I decided to tell stories and write songs about the Dene people I have met. I want to write about the people that I grew up with. When I'm done, a lot of people are going to know who Sugha is, and others as well.