Native son

For a boy in a Rhode Island parish in the forties, the choice was this:
to submit to the ghosts of his ancestors or to escape their grasp
and invent himself as American. A memoir

By David Plante ’61

The world in which I was born and grew up in the United States of America was so little known outside itself, it could be said that it wasn’t American. My parish in Providence, Rhode Island, participated in the United States—my father principally by voting in the local and national elections (always for the Republican Party), my mother by shopping in the supermarkets and the department stores, my brothers by being inducted into or joining the armed services, and my younger brother and I by going away to college—but the world of the United States never participated in ours.

We Franco-Americans were not at all like other late 19th-century immigrants from Europe into the United States. We did come at the time of the great immigration, but we had been in North America for hundreds of years, some of us for as long if not longer than the Pilgrim Fathers of 1620. (We were told by the nuns who taught us in our parochial school that, after all, Champlain founded the city of Québec in 1608.) We were not European. Our old country was the forests of America, and we had more native blood in us, given that we intermarried without prejudice with the indigènes, than any Yankee.

Illustrations by Russ Williams
I recall, from when I was a boy in that house, empty lots in which the neighborhood gangs played. Some of the lots, like the one next to our house, had trees. On summer nights when the window of my bedroom was wide open and shadows of trees were cast on the screen, I was terrified of that small lot of woods. In bed I would stare at the shadows, then shout out, and my father or mother would come to my room, take me to the window to look, and say, “There’s no one out there. There’s nothing there.” The fresh nighttime through the screen smelled of wild roses that grew along the boundary between our narrow yard and the trees, and of some other, acrid smell: perhaps skunk cabbage, or skunk, which I thought of as bête puante. Moonlight fell through the trees out there, and I was frightened that, among the old rusted automobile fenders and tires dumped in those woods, there were people who, when I was alone in my room, came up to my window and looked in. My parents couldn’t convince me that they weren’t there. The lot of spindly trees was a forest, and people were hiding in it.

I went to the parish church every Sunday for Mass, during which Monsieur le Curé, who could, it was said, speak English but refused to, gave his sermons in French. I attended the parish grammar school, where many of the nuns, les Mères de Jésus-Marie, with names like Mère St. Felix de Valois, Mère St. Euclide, Mère St. Epiphane, could speak only French. We were taught French in the morning by Mère St. Joseph de Nazareth and English in the afternoon by Mother St. Flore, one of the few nuns who spoke English. If in the afternoon, we pledged our allegiance to the United States, in the morning we sang:

O Canada, terre de nos aieux,
Ton front est cent des fleurons glorieux—
The first book I was taught from was called Mon Premier Livre de Lecture, and had two copyrights: Canada, 1935; and Washington, D.C., 1940. The nun who taught us had carefully covered all the students’ books in brown wrappers with a black-on-brown picture of the Concord Minuteman on the front. The wrapper had to do with the U.S. efforts in World War II, which had ended the summer before I entered the parochial school. Inside, the book had to do with my Canuck parish.
While I thought of my father as having a deep past,
I thought of my mother as having no past. There seemed  
nothing unknown, nothing secretive, about her,
nothing I couldn’t understand if I put my mind to it,
and this was what I thought about the United States.

Though she didn’t like Francos, she had to see my
father’s family, which, once a year at least, gathered in
clan meetings. There were no such clan meetings
among my mother and her brothers and sisters.
The meeting of my father’s clan often made the
local newspaper.

**Plante Family Reunion is Held**

*Annual affair conducted at Orchard Farm, Harmony—*

*More than 100 attend*

The 17th annual reunion of the Plante family was held
yesterday at Orchard Farm, Harmony, the home of Mr.
and Mrs. Omer Plante, where more than 100 enjoyed a chicken
and chowder dinner and basket lunch served at tables under
a canopy in the yard.

**Bingo and Sports Events on Program**

*Some come from far*

Sister Thérèse Marguerite of Outremont Convent,
Montreal, was a guest. Other relatives were present from
Seattle, Providence, Arctic Centre, North Grosvendordale,
Conn., and Chepachet. Three families were represented by
three generations.

I recall this meeting of the clan, the last there
was. Cars, with rounded hoods and fenders and
running boards, were parked in a grass-grown field
among trees, and, like an encampment, folding
tables were set up among the cars with bottles and
cardboard boxes on them. The center of the camp
was a low, brown, clapboard house with a big
screened porch, which no one was allowed to enter.
In front of the house, in a wide, bare yard, was the
canvas canopy, and long wooden tables with benches
attached were under it.

I sat with my parents at one of these tables, and
Matante Cora as well, who, standing at the end of
the table, served into bowls with a ladle from a big
pot, what was always known in my family as a
*chuadron*, not clam chowder, but pea soup she had
made with hominy, as thick as porridge.

My father said, “C’est ça, la vrai soupe aux pois.”
My mother didn’t like hominy, and thought the
ights between my mother and father took place on winter Sundays. My parents went to the eight o’clock Mass, the Mass for the students, which I, at the parochial school, went to, and after Mass we visited my aunt—or, to give her the one-word honorific—Matante Cora. She lived at the top of a tenement house, and her only heating was a black coal stove in the kitchen. She had been to the six o’clock Mass, but she had, since then, said the prayers a nun would say. At the large, round wooden table in the middle of the kitchen, she gave us tea and crullers from the bakery, and, as if in return for her hospitality she expected to have her sufferings listened to, she described, in detail so vivid it made me feel her pain, the suffering she endured in her right eye, a suffering that would, in her offering of it up to God, earn her eternity. “Yes, yes,” my mother said. My father sat at a distance from her around the curve of the table, my brother and I sitting still between our parents. My father said nothing, seemed not to be listening. “Yes,” my mother said and looked toward my father to try to get his eye and indicate to him that it was time to leave. But my father, as silent as if he were alone, stared out, not at the flue to the coal stove, not even at the silvery coiled wire handle that was used for shutting or opening the flue, but at something, my mother could never understand what. She frowned. Matante Cora said, “Sometimes I think my eye will explode from the pain.” I saw in my mother’s face, which was usually so tender, a hardening, and her nostrils tightened. She had to stay until my father, as if a trance were broken, looked round the table and us at it, seeming, for a moment, not to recognize quite where he was or who we
She understood he was tired and, after a week’s work, didn’t want to go out, but stay in. She understood. But she was in all week long, and day after day was the same in the house, and sometimes she wished for something different.

Indian artifacts. On top of a large glass case containing shelves of earthenware pots was a birch-bark canoe. My mother pointed up to it and said, “That’s what your Indian ancestors used to use to travel along rivers. Do you think you could paddle such a big canoe?” I stared up at it, knowing I wouldn’t be able to paddle it, and feeling that because I couldn’t, I couldn’t be an Indian. But I also felt my mother didn’t understand: that it wasn’t being strong enough to paddle such a big canoe that would make me an Indian or not. My mother’s idea about Indians was that they were strong and hard and masculine, and that I wouldn’t survive among them unless I was strong and hard and masculine also.

On the way home in the dark, the bus, empty but for us, was cold.

Some Sundays, as my mother walked about the living room repeating, over and over, that she would die in our house without ever having been anywhere else, my father would say to me that he was going to visit his sister Cora, and did I want to come with him? I knew I should stay with my mother, stay and at least listen to her tell me, over and over, how she never was allowed any difference in her life, how she couldn’t even have different wallpaper never mind go anywhere different, but I wanted to get away with my father.

My father asked my mother, “Won’t you come, too?”

Setting her jaw, my mother answered, “I have sewing to do.”

In the afternoon, Matante Cora’s apartment was chilly, the fire in the coal stove low.

She told me that the great pleasure of her childhood was oranges at Christmas. “On avait des oranges aînées à Noël.” Because she had had no toys, my father, older than she, had made her a small doll’s house, and because she had left it hanging about—une traine, which no Franco household
Seriously, my mother asked Matante Cora if Saint Erasmus was the saint you would pray to if you had constipation, for one of the most important topics of conversation in the parish was constipation and laxatives. Matante Cora said, solemnly, “Why do you think I am so regular in my bowel movements?”

could tolerate—her mother had burned it, and the last Cora saw of it was the black hot plate of the coal range closing down on its burning roof.

And while I listened, my father sat still and silent, looking at I didn’t know what.

When Matante Cora talked about their mother collecting wild sumac berries from the bushes that grew in the lots among the clapboard houses to make a medicine, I imagined it was the presence of his mother he was looking at, she standing in the open doorway into what had been her bedroom, just off the kitchen. And it seemed to me that I, too, saw her.

My aunt said to me, “Mémère stood at the foot of my bed all last night,” and my father stopped her with, “Tais-toi à c’êtreure.”

Other Sunday afternoons, my mother, willfully inverting her need for a different life, would, her eyes hard, say to my father that to get out of our house she’d go visit Matante Cora, as if she had nowhere else to go to get out of our house. She didn’t ask him to come with her, and he didn’t suggest going. Without looking at my father, I said to my mother, because I thought I had to take her side, that I’d go with her. Going out, my mother slammed the front door. (My father never slammed the door, but closed it, even at moments of anger, with slow deliberation.) My mother walked through the cold to Matante Cora’s as though with the determination to tell her something she couldn’t tell my father, something that would somehow make the difference she needed in her marriage, but which she had to have known Matante Cora would not communicate to my father, or even understand.

Matante Cora was blackening her coal stove. Her kitchen was more than chill; it was cold. Her expression was one of surprise and welcome, her smile wide, for Matante Cora could never be faulted on her politeness; but she made a show of being interrupted in blackening her stove, and said she couldn’t heat water to give us cups of tea. My mother said it didn’t matter, she and I were out for a walk and she thought we’d stop by. We sat at the kitchen table in our overcoats.

And Matante Cora, as if her politeness entitled her to reciprocal politeness from my mother, took advantage of what she was entitled to by elaborating, more than ever, on her devotions. She took from her room her newest acquisitions of holy cards, and spread them on the table and explained, in detail, what martyrdom each saint depicted had suffered, what each saint would intercede between the suppliant and God for, what prayers she said to each saint. One card showed the Disembowelment of Saint Erasmus, his intestines being wound out of him onto a big wheel.

This card made my mother and me look at one another and smile, and I thought that perhaps my mother went to Matante Cora’s to reassure herself that, really, Matante Cora’s devotions, in which the devotions of the parish flamed most flagrantly, were not to be taken seriously, the flames fake flames. If what made a Canuck was a Canuck’s religion, the Canuck religion was—as Matante Cora, the most Canuck of Canucks, was—to be laughed at quietly. My mother had the humor, which was in itself not at all Canuck, to laugh; and she liked to laugh.

Seriously, my mother asked Matante Cora if Saint Erasmus was the saint you would pray to if you had constipation. She could seem to be serious about this, for one of the most important topics of conversation in the parish was constipation and laxatives. Matante Cora said, solemnly, “Why do you think I am so regular in my bowel movements?”

My mother’s joke, which I, smiling, got, Matante Cora did not get at all. And that my mother was able to make a joke and smile made me feel better about her. She was all right as long as she could joke and smile.

Then, when my mother finally did mention my father to Matante Cora, she seemed to me not to be condemning him as I had feared, but as if she were joking a little about him too. And this was a relief, because I was most reassured by my mother’s love for my father when she could make light fun of his own total, but total, inability to joke. She would say about him, “He couldn’t come out because he took a laxative.”

Matante Cora nodded in understanding. “If he’d say the prayer I say, he wouldn’t have to take a laxative.”
Smiling a fine smile, my mother said, “You know how stubborn he can be.”

“Tête? Je sais comme il est têtu,” Matante Cora answered. “He got that from his mother.”

“You think he’s like his mother?” my mother would ask.

“Like his mother? Like his mother? He couldn’t be more like his mother. I tried to change my mother’s mind once when she took a vow of silence against our sister Juliette for becoming pregnant before she got mar-
ried, but she never, ever broke her vow. I’d say, ‘But, Ma, she’s your daughter, and she’s been forgiven by God for her sin and is happily married.’ But my mother never, ever spoke to her, even when they were together at a wake or a baptism. Never, ever.”

“Never?” my mother said.

“Never, ever.”
My grandmother lived on the top floor of the tenement and my father said she had once carried a washing machine up the stairs by herself, grasping the two front legs and lifting the whole thing, wringer and all, and simply climbing. Was that story Indian?

“He’s so silent sometimes I wonder if he has taken a vow of silence.”

“I never counted for my mother,” Matante Cora said. “And when she appears to me, when I see her at the foot of my bed, I ask her what she wants with me now, when, alive, she never wanted anything from me. Does she want to tell me she feels sorry for burning my doll’s house?”

Matante Cora, unlike my father, was incapable of withdrawing into silence, and while she was telling us, again, how her mother burned her doll’s house, the church bell clanged for Sunday Vespers, and only then, as the bell rang, rang as I imagined a bell rung by the wind in a deserted, snowbound village far, far away, did Matante go silent.

After the bell stopped, my mother asked Matante Cora if she was going to Vespers, and Matante Cora, who, in fact, only went to church to fulfill her Sunday and Holy Day obligations, said she didn’t think she would this time, she’d have to dress and do up her hair. My mother and I went, and on the way I thought of that deserted, half-ruined village in the snow far, far away, where the church bell rang only when the wind blew strong enough to swing it, and it seemed to me that the parish I was walking through with my mother was that distant village. My mother and I sat at the back of the cold church.

Sitting or kneeling or standing next to her in the pew during the ritual, I wondered about the differences between my mother and father, differences that were so great my mother and father seemed to have not only different ancestries, but, as if this were, after all, what ancestries led to, different Gods. I did not think my mother prayed to the same God as my father.

My mother was outwardly more devout than my father. She went to church when she wasn’t obliged to, such as for Vespers; but my father, like Matante Cora, only went when obligation made going a duty. But, for all her outward devotion, she questioned, with a smile, the beliefs she was told by her Church she must uphold. She said to me, “Between you, me and the lamppost, I don’t think we go anywhere when we die.” Not to believe in life after death was not to believe in the central tenet of our religion, the one tenet that justified all of Matante’s longing for eternity. I smiled with my mother, not only because part of me was beginning to agree with her, but because I was amused by her irreverence towards our religion’s most basic belief. What our religion most meant to my mother had to do, not with the next world, but this world. My mother’s going to church had something social in it, in that she might, after Vespers, meet some parishioners in the foyer and talk for half an hour. My mother was, essentially, a secular woman. She did not believe in ghosts.

My father, who even at obligatory Mass, seemed outwardly not to participate, but, saying his rosary, to be alone, was inwardly as religious as Matante Cora. He believed in ghosts.

After Vespers, and after half an hour of standing in the foyer with my mother listening to her talk to the grocer’s wife, I thought of going back to see Matante Cora.

This desire to see my aunt made me feel a little sick to my stomach, as though I were allowing myself something I shouldn’t allow myself.

From Matante Cora, I knew that my great-grandmother, a Blackfoot, smoked a corn-cob pipe and smeared her body with bear fat in the winter to keep warm. She met Adolphe, my great-grandfather, called le Grand Coq, in a lumber camp in Northern Michigan. Her mother’s name was Kirou, and she called herself Cliche Kirou. She moved with Adolphe to his village, St. Bartholomey, and helped him with his work as a fur trader with the Indians. Most of the Indians would come into the house without knocking and, if Adolphe was not there or eating, they would place the bundle of pelts on the floor and sit on a bench behind the wood stove and wait. Some Indians did knock before they came in, and, thinking this was what always had to be done to open a door, also knocked before they went out. My great-grandfather, who recognized certain Indians by their footsteps, went to sit with the one who was waiting
behind the stove, and there they smoked, forehead to forehead. Cliche Kirou stood just behind Adolphe when he discussed the pelts with the Indians. When she was about to give birth, her mother, my great-great-grandmother, came from wherever she lived to deliver her daughter's baby and bind it to a board with lengths of cloth, then she went away into the forest again. My great-grandmother carried my grandmother as a papoose on her back.

I remember my grandmother as a gaunt woman, her cheekbones high and sharp edged, and her jaw square. She appeared to have permanent bruising about her eyes, as from the boney edges of the eye sockets of her skull. Her eyes were small and set close to her large nose. She wore her white hair in a long braid rolled up with hairpins at the nape of her neck.

She lived on the top floor of the tenement, and my father said she had once carried a washing machine up the stairs by herself, grasping the two front legs and lifting the whole thing, wringer and all, and simply climbing. Was that story Indian?

She prepared medicines from weeds she collected. Was that Indian?

She couldn’t write, was inalphabete, and when making out a shopping list for her daughter Cora, drew carrots, potatoes with eyes, a chicken, with marks after them to indicate how many pounds were to be bought. Was that Indian?

When Matante Cora told me that my grandmother had given to my father, not to her, the eldest daughter, clothes—including purple silk stockings and white undergarments—which she had instructed him to give to the undertaker on her death so she would be buried in them, I asked: “Was that Indian?”

Matante shrugged.

Did she think my father and grandmother had a special relationship that was Indian?

“Je sais pas,” my aunt answered.

I couldn’t understand my father’s relationship with his mother; I wouldn’t have been able to if I’d wondered about it when she was alive, and I could less when she was dead. Dead, she was another person, if she remained a person, one possible for only my father to see.

Pressing my mind to see, there would occur to me, stretching out behind him as on a deep, wide, flat level of darkness, nothing more than the dim outline of a dark woman, and behind her another, darker woman, and behind her a still darker woman, going back and back until the line disappeared.

The bits of information that Matante Cora gave me about Cliche Kirou—that she made moccasins and peed in them to soften the leather—made her, not brighter, but darker to me.

Nothing was known about her but that she was different. All her beliefs—in life, in death, and in God—were different.

She was invisible to me, but in her unimaginable difference she pulled at me so strongly I felt that if I gave in to her pull I would be lost. She frightened me. My father frightened me. (When I was a boy, one evening at the supper table, he, looking at me, suddenly rolled his eyes up into his head so that his irises disappeared and I saw only the gleaming whites, which made me shout, and my father rolled his irises back down again and looked at me, but I continued to shout, and my mother told my father not to do that again.) Those mothers who stood behind my father made him frightening.

After I left Matante Cora’s, I didn’t want to go home. I went down the hill from the parish to the flats and the river and past the brick factories, in one of which my father worked.

As much as I felt it then, I didn’t think then, but think now: for me, belonging to America required an act of will—I would have to will myself to do in America everything I didn’t want to do, such as get a summer job when I was 16, go into the Army when I was 18, get a job when I was 20, work to bring up a family, all of which were to my mother legitimate demands made on me by my country. And my mother was right—I must believe that there were no forces that determined my life beyond those that I willed, and I must, as conscientiously as guarding against sin, guard against giving in to those great forces. Of course I would fulfill myself. Of course. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t because of that longing I got from my father, a longing that had nothing to do with my mother’s America, a longing which I knew my mother’s America would not allow me, but which I felt, at moments when the longing seemed to pull at my arms and my legs, must be more American than any America my mother could have imagined, as American as America’s past, vast, dark forests.

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