

Getting out! Getting out! Getting out!

By Bill Hess

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The window is open and cars can be heard driving by. Occasionally, voices — free voices — enter in from the sidewalk two stories below. Harry John sits at a large wooden table. The wall behind him is papered with a giant photographic scene of a forest.

Anita, nearly eight now, wanders happily in and out of the room, climbing often onto the coveted place on her father's lap — a lap which has been missing most of her lifetime. There are other relatives here; a sister, Nora David, 23 years old and striking to look at; nephew Leonard John, a young man now; cousin Sarah Pence and her eight-year-old son, Chester. There is Katie John, Harry's mother, who perhaps has suffered more these past six-and-a-half years even than the rest.

This is not prison, but it is not true freedom, either. This is the Glennwood "half-way" Center in downtown Anchorage, a place where inmates about to be paroled go to get acclimated gradually to freedom.

Harry will live here until his release June 6. He will be allowed to work, and has already begun to search for a job.

Her son's crime and the six-and-a-half years he spent paying for it has not weakened Katie's affection for him. "He was a pretty good boy," she recalls the days before the troubles began. "He was good hunting! He was good fishing! When he got to alcohol, that really changed him. Then Viet Nam! After he came back, he can't control himself."

"All the time he used to help! Hunting moose! Hunting everything! I really liked that. He's a good worker, too. He's cutting wood. He's a good cook!"

Most of her son's incarceration time was spent Outside in federal prisons. "Even when he was down in Seattle, at that McNeil Island, I went to visit him," Katie recalls. Anita, then only two years old, came also. The prison was massive to a little girl from a tiny Alaskan village.

Katie chuckles a bit as she remembers Anita's reaction. "My daddy got big house! she told me. Oh, we were just happy to see him that time. We spent almost six to seven hours a day on that island, every day for a week!"

"The visits were beautiful," Harry remembers. "Only one thing made me mad. The officers kept trying to enforce prison rules on Anita. 'Hey! Don't do that!' I was in jail, not her! Those rules are not for kids!"

Will a feast be in order when Harry returns?

"We think we probably will," Katie hesitates.

"Not we think, we will!" sister Nora speaks up. It was



Nora David, Harry John and daughter Anita, Katie John, Leonard John, Sarah Pence and Chester Pence enjoy a moment of semi-freedom for Harry after six-and-a-half years of imprisonment.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

going to be a surprise for Harry, but the secret is out now. There will be ducks, moose, fish, porcupine, muskrat, turkey and ham.

Cousin Sarah brings up another fond memory from days past. "Harry used to make the best steam baths! Him and I were tied for making steam baths." At Hiland Mountain Correctional Center, Harry had sought the use of a ceremonial sweatlodge for the Native Cultural Council.

Although the past years have been hard, the other villagers of Mentasta Lake eased the burden. Their frequent visits brought support for the grieving parents.

"They helped pay her (Katie's) way Stateside when she went to visit Harry," adds nephew Leonard. "The whole village is related. We are like one family. One close knit family. When something happens, everybody helps."

When a loved one goes off to prison, "It's like a family member died," explains Leonard.

Now, it is as if the dead had been resurrected. "Him and I were really close," smiles Nora, recalling the good of the old days. "I was just a young kid when he left. He would play jokes on me. I would play jokes on him. He came back, and I grew up a little. I wish time could go back to the happy times . . . But they'll be back!"

After his incarceration Nora did not see her brother until just before this past Christmas when he was transferred from the federal prison system back to Alaska. "He got even better looking!" she laughs.

"She is much more prettier now," Harry returns the compliment. "More mature. She

was just a little kid. When I come back, here she's a beautiful woman, and married!"

Anita runs suddenly back into the room and climbs onto her father's lap, opens her mouth and shows him where some baby teeth have been pushed out.

"Hey, this one here!" laughs Harry. "She's just getting bigger and bigger! I thought she would stay the same. In jail, I thought the whole world stopped turning! I thought all these kids, everybody, were just staying the same. But when I came out, the kids were all bigger. It's sad. I've missed so much!"

"I really revered my uncle when I was young," Leonard suddenly throws in. "I'd wake up at five in the morning to go build a fire with him. I always remember his pancakes. He made good pancakes! If anyone bothered me, he'd stick up for me. I've missed it. When we cut wood, when we cooked dog food." Harry once kept close to 40 sled dogs.

"I hope he gets the job," Katie says. "Then he can go to work and take care of me."

"That sounds about the way it should be," adds Harry. "She's done enough worrying. What most people don't realize, when we're in jail, it's not us that's being hurt; it's the families of the inmate. The mom, dad, children; the relatives."

Added to the pain for Katie was the fact that she lost another son to death while Harry was gone, and a grandson.

Nora recalled the potlatch at Hiland Mountain last March, which was organized by the cultural council under her brother's direction. Inmates of many cultures were involved,

as were a great number of people and groups from outside the prison walls. It was obvious that under her brother's leadership, the council had become a positive force in the prison.

"I noticed he had respect," Mary says emotionally. "I was proud to be his sister!"

"I couldn't believe that was my uncle!" adds Leonard. "I thought, 'he'll help where we're from. I could see him in office. I could tell he was involved in the Native movement. We need someone like that!'"

"That's what's expected of you, Harry," Nora nudges her brother's shoulder, as his daughter leans comfortably upon the other.

Six-and-a-half years in prison and now all these expectations. "My feeling is, I know where I'm at," says Harry. "I know what's expected of me. I also know what will happen if I go against the rules. I'll be back where I started from."

"We will give him support," says Nora. "He knows we care."

"We will support him," Leonard agrees. "But it will really be up to him. He can do whatever he wants. It's up to him."

"I believe I have to get involved," says Harry. "I believe in my people, which is Native people! I have to become aware of how things are run in the Native corporations; how they affect my people. When you talk about corporations, you are talking about land, too. Land is a very important part of my people's past; their traditions. The young, and the unborn, we have to insure that they do have this land their grandfathers had for centuries past. I have to be strong for them.

If I get into power, I will have to listen to my people, and say what they want me to say."

Harry wants to know more about the Indian Reorganization Act governments, to see what role they might play in Alaska's future.

"We have to start going back to the teachings of the Elders," he stresses. "They know what's good for our people. They should not be discarded, thrown into an old folks home! They should be listened to! We are building the corporations on youth. That isn't as concrete as what the Elders know!"

An ex-convict, especially one who served his time for violent crimes, can expect much mistrust and skepticism as he tries to rise in the world. "It will be hard with people who can't look at both sides of the fence," Harry agrees.

"People from Mentasta will listen," Leonard claims.

"The people from Mentasta will realize that what I say comes from the heart," Harry explains.

"We need a strong voice," adds Nora.

"That's what we really need," says mother Katie. "Someone smart. Someone who can talk, who can do right!"

After the visit, Harry is allowed a quick walk in the park with his family. Then he kisses his daughter and gives everyone a warm goodbye as they climb into a pickup truck.

Word has come in that Harry has been successful in landing a job. It is getting close to 8:00 p.m. as Harry waves goodbye to his departing loved ones. At 11:00, he will be at Flipper's Restaurant; washing dishes for \$5.00 an hour.