

# SEEKING SAFETY

Carlee Wilson

Ilchee paddled hard, her dark hair whipping back in the wind, the perspiration on her forehead following it. Every stroke was a reminder of the distance she needed to place between her and her husband, Casino, so she bore down with all her strength to pick up speed.

"I will kill you, Ilchee!", Casino had earlier proclaimed, blaming her for the death of a son shared with a different wife. She immediately fled her husband's village after he came tearing through the longhouse, her bare feet barely touching the ground as she ran to the river, the pang of rejection deep in her heart.

Breathing heavily, she knew she needed to find safety in a new location. "I must get to Skitchuxwa," she thought, hopeful that the fur traders would welcome her behind the timber walls of Fort Vancouver. The words of her husband, Casino, continued to ring in her ears like the wind. "My son is dead, and it was your magic, your prayers that did the harm, medicine woman." She was innocent, but his fury could not be tamed.

Her husband's village was nearly 100 miles from her home near the mouth of iyaqaytł imat, the Columbia River. It didn't matter where she was, as she knew these waters well. Before her arranged marriage to Casino, her father, Comcomly, the one-eyed chief, took her on many journeys up and down the big river until it became as much a part of her as the blue veins in her strong forearms.<sup>1</sup>

After paddling upriver, she veered for the north shore. She was close.

Ilchee jumped lightly from her canoe to drag it to land, careful not to make a big splash. She quickly crouched down on the beach behind the canoe, scooping up a sip of the rushing water. She took a deep breath as she soaked in the river's energy and then looked around before moving on to some nearby cattails, tall enough to hide behind, but giving her the ability to inspect her surroundings easily. She needed to ensure she wasn't being followed, and her senses told her she was okay for now. It would have taken half a dozen men from Casino's village to keep up with her in a canoe, this extension of her body, but she knew they wouldn't be far behind.

Ilchee's heart buzzed with yearning. She tucked her dark hair behind her ears as she stood up again, silently wishing she could have gone downriver to her home village, to her territory, but she needed immediate shelter from the imminent danger of her husband and was unsure if her running home would lead to danger for her people. The closest safe place for her to retreat to was Fort Vancouver, where she could gather strength before making another plan.

The coast was clear, so Ilchee began the walk from the shore inland to the fort. Once she arrived, she could feel distant eyes on her as she walked toward her final destination. Night was just beginning to blanket the landscape, and she was steps away from the doors of the fort, its pathways lined by lamps and fiery torches. Ilchee came to a stop. The fort's gate was closed for the night. She took in a deep breath and stood up straight, forcing some composure in the midst of her enveloping

fear. She tapped on a small hatch, which opened to reveal the face of a guard. "John McLoughlin," she blurted, a little shocked at her own quickness of tongue. The guardsman seemed to understand her simplistic request, nodded his head, and turned to a second guard to fetch the fort's chief factor.

Dr. John McLoughlin was a tall and scruffy-looking man. As the chief factor of Fort Vancouver under the Hudson's Bay Company, it was his duty to determine who could come and go. He came to the gate with the young guard that had fetched him and knew immediately that something was wrong when he saw Ilchee alone. He knew of Ilchee and wondered why a woman of such royalty was travelling without company. "Please, gentlemen, let her in immediately."

Ilchee walked inside, unsure of how McLoughlin would react to her request. McLoughlin waited a moment for her to speak but could sense her nerves. "łaxaw'yam." *Welcome*, he said in Chinuk Wawa. He was a fluent speaker. Ilchee let out a deep breath and fell to her knees, suddenly exhausted and overwhelmed. She explained to McLoughlin that she was on the run, carefully detailing what led her to Fort Vancouver. "Ipsət nayka." *I need to hide*.

"Chaku, Ilchee," he welcomed her into the fort, extending his hands to her to help her stand up again. "Yawa-iwa," he said, directing her toward the guesthouse where a comfortable room was waiting for her, and then requested the guard that she be guided to the room and brought food for the night.

Ilchee felt some of the tension in her shoulders ease. She felt safe in McLoughlin's company. He had a reputation for demanding respect among his employees and the white settlers of the region—not only for himself, but for his Indigenous wife, Marguerite. He was known for his intuition and sense of justice.

"You're protected here," he said in a gentle tone as Ilchee walked away to her room.

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Ilchee awoke to the sounds of conversations outside her small room and the smell of fresh bread from the Bake House. The light crept around the drapes on the window, leaving threads of bright white on the floor, and she realized she had slept in many hours' past sunrise. Ilchee sat up in the bed, the room spinning slightly and her body sore from yesterday. She slowly stood up, bracing herself against the small dresser beside the bed.

She was unsure of how to operate within the fort; although she felt the communal energy, this place was nothing like the villages she was used to, the longhouses she called home. Does she seek out breakfast? Does she wait for a bucket of water to wash her hair? She was once the bride of a powerful Scotsman in Astoria named Duncan McDougal, who had ordered such things for her, but that was a different time and place. Her father sought out a new husband for her upon McDougal's departure to his homeland; a politically minded marriage to Chief Casino was quickly assembled and meant to ease tensions between the two Chinookan chieftains.

Ilchee rubbed her temples. It wouldn't be long before Casino would come looking for her and she worried about when that might be. It could be hours, or it could be days. She paced the small room, wondering how long until she overstayed her welcome at the fort. She knew that timing was everything. Her life depended on the hospitality of Dr. McLoughlin and his fellow white settlers. Would they keep her safe?

A soft knock startled Ilchee. She gently opened the door to the face of a young servant woman. Hawaiian. Likely married to a laborer in the fort's outer village.



Art by Tom Greyeyes.

The young woman smiled, entered the room, and set a tray of food on the bed. She stood for a moment in solidarity with Ilchee, bowed her head politely, and left just as quickly as she came. Ilchee devoured the food until another knock came. She opened the door to a guardsman motioning for her to follow.

In a small but elegant room, Dr. McLoughlin sat waiting for Ilchee's arrival. The room smelled of tobacco and tea. McLoughlin had round spectacles on the bridge of his nose as he was reading a long document, which he put down upon Ilchee's arrival. "Ilchee," he began in a somber tone, "please sit." Ilchee sat in a wooden chair across from McLoughlin as the guard disappeared down the hallway of the chief factor's house. McLoughlin began to explain that while Ilchee slept that morning, several of Casino's men had arrived to announce

their chief would be in attendance for tomorrow's trading event. "I suspect they were here to begin their investigation of your whereabouts. We trade with Casino's men weekly, but Casino does not often make an appearance himself." McLoughlin paused for a moment, taking the glasses off his face. "It's customary for us to give the chief a tour of the fort's grounds each visit."

Ilchee could feel the fear at the base of her spine, its intensity growing the more she thought about what Casino would do to her should he or his men find her. She knew this was it; her time behind the fort's walls was being cut short. She also understood what was not being said by the doctor—that a strong relationship with Casino was vital for the fort, as trading was an integral part of everyone's livelihood here.

"I'll go tonight."

"I had some men bring your canoe into the fort early this morning. I'm unsure if your people have already seen it, but I believe it was a good measure to hide it just in case."

Ilchee nodded her head. "Hayu masi." *Thank you.*

McLoughlin smiled. "In the meantime, please make yourself at home here at the fort. We will meet again this evening before your departure."

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Ilchee wandered the fort, unaware of the light rain falling or where she was walking. Her sense of urgency to find safety had now created a pit in her stomach. She could no longer depend on the safety of the fort with Casino's pending arrival and the potential of his men lingering in its outskirts. She didn't dare leave in the daylight and knew that the best plan would be under the cover of darkness.

That evening, Ilchee was summoned back to McLoughlin's small office in the chief factor's house. She arrived again with a guard and sat in the same wooden chair as before. She could tell that McLoughlin had been thinking hard, his near-white hair more disheveled than earlier, the lines between his eyebrows seeming deeper. She waited for him to speak.

McLoughlin got up from his chair and looked out the window before turning to Ilchee. "The guards have informed me that Casino's men are lingering in the nearby woods. Although I think it's best you leave before Casino's arrival tomorrow, we must tread carefully. I suggest waiting until nightfall to leave. I'll send several of my men with you to carry the canoe down to the river if you'd like."

Ilchee nodded in agreement, her body feeling numb. Casino's men were waiting

for her; the danger becoming more real. After dinner, she sat on the bed in her small guestroom, knees pulled to her chest, preparing herself mentally for what was next. Would she be able to flee in the night? Would she find safety?

A knock on the door jolted her from her thoughts. It was McLoughlin himself coming to fetch her. He didn't need to explain anything. She knew it was time.

McLoughlin walked Ilchee to the main gate. "We're unsure how close they are, but they won't see you in the village. We've asked that everyone blow out their torches and lights. Your canoe is already at the shore. We can't be seen aiding you from here, unfortunately. Our existence here depends—"

Ilchee took McLoughlin's hand in understanding, stopping him from further explanation. She knew he couldn't do more without jeopardizing himself and others at the fort. They stood there for a moment, letting the silence do the talking.

Ilchee let McLoughlin's hand go and turned to face the gate. She pulled her shoulders back and took in a deep breath, tucking her hair behind her ears. "I'm ready."

The guards took hold of each door and opened them, the soft creaking sound of the wood filling the silence around them, and Ilchee stepped into the dark.

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Ilchee stands as a seven-foot statue overlooking the Columbia River. My mother showed her to me one sunny afternoon after her recent move from Marysville, Washington. I had driven from north of Seattle to visit her. Each time I came to Vancouver to see her again, I made a point also to see Ilchee; her humble face pointed west to where my ancestors—*like her*—called home.

I was fascinated with her. Her slanted forehead, a symbol of royalty, her large earrings, her nose piercing, her slender hands. I tried learning as much as I could about this regal relative in bronze, but my Google searches and library books returned minimal information, and I was unaware of anyone within my tribe with further knowledge. Upon reading what was available, I was left with more questions than answers, so I took this opportunity to write for the Confluence journal and fill the gaps of Ilchee's story with my imagination.

*For us, that vengeful husband is the continued consequences of colonization. We are forever married to a state of unrest due to a series of events that took our rights away.*

I chose not to give Ilchee's story an ending. I realized while writing this that Ilchee's sense of urgency is still relevant to the Chinook experience today. Ilchee is indeed a real figure of this region from the 1800s, and just as she urgently sought safety from her husband, our tribe—the Chinook—is also urgently seeking safety.

The lower Columbia River has been Chinook territory since time immemorial. We've been stewards of the land and waters here until the introduction of settlers, but the past two hundred years have not been good to us. We've experienced government-abandoned treaties, forced attendance of boarding schools, and displacement from our ancestral land, among other atrocities.

In 1851, our ancestors signed the Treaty of Tansy Point, a promise by the U.S. government to provide us with housing, healthcare, food, and other resources in

exchange for taking our land. The treaty was never ratified by Congress, and we've been fighting for our rights ever since with some wins and some losses along the way.

What we are seeking is called *federal recognition*.

More than 500 tribes in the United States have federal recognition, many of them through treaties. Federal recognition means that the U.S. recognizes the tribe as a sovereign entity, enters into a government-to-government relationship with them, and provides them with the resources I listed above. There are so many reasons we as a tribe need federal recognition that I don't even know where to begin describing them.

My hope is that Ilchee's story inspires you to learn more about her people and how we are still here. I hope you will cheer for us just as you may cheer for her as she escapes to safety.

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*Carlee Wilson is a citizen of the Chinook Indian Nation and currently works for Stacey Abrams' campaign for governor in Georgia. She received a bachelor's in Creative Writing from Western Washington University and a master's in Conflict Transformation and Social Justice from Queen's University Belfast. She loves history and using storytelling to make historical topics more accessible for learning.*

## References

1. For more on Concomly, see: Jack and Claire Nisbet, "Comcomly (1760s?–1830)," *HistoryLink* (March 2012), <https://www.historylink.org/file/10042>; Dean Baker and Columbian staff writer, "Chinook Leader Buried in Hudson's Bay Co. Cemetery," *The Columbian*, May 9, 2005.





Ilchee statue. Photo by Confluence staff.