

Sable Sweetgrass

Age: 29

Kainai Nation

University of Calgary

Calgary, AB

Maternal Ties

When I graduated back in 2011 from the Faculty of Law at the University of Calgary, I was wearing my family's elk tooth dress underneath a purple graduation robe. I had asked the grad committee if I would be able to wear the dress alone, but my request was denied.

I decided to wear it anyway, underneath their robe. Just before my name was called I planned to slip off my shoes and put on my grandma Annie's moccasins which were tucked under my arms, beneath the robes. My grandma Annie was there, so was my mom and dad, and I had told them to look at my feet when I went up there to accept my degree, so that they would know that underneath I had on the dress.

I sat there listening to the names being called out followed by the applause and camera flashes as each graduating student had their moment. My name, Mary Stands Alone, daughter of Pearline and Alex Stands Alone, was still far off and so I pulled my right hand into the robe and I held the beaded and quilled amulet that hung from my neck. I let go and started stroking the hundreds of elk teeth sewn onto the midnight blue wool, feeling the rows and rows of smooth polished teeth running from the neck to the waist. I could imagine the pride my great, great grandmother Appanii would have had wearing her dress.

Grandma tells me that Appanii gave her dress over to her daughter Sikotan when she came home from boarding school. For a woman the elk tooth dress was a symbol of status and achievement, the more teeth the more prominent, and the dress had hundreds. My great grandma Sikotan was the first person in our family to go to the boarding school and the first to speak English. Grandma says that her mom was to wear the dress to the Okan, the sundance, that summer where it was held secretly. However, when her mom got home from the school she refused to put the dress on. What was worse was that Sikotan's baby cord amulet she had worn since birth was gone, taken away from her at the school.

My grandma says that her mother Sikotan was a devoted Catholic. The dress that

Appanii tried to give her and the amulet that Sikotan would have worn throughout her life were no longer of value to her in her new faith, new education.

My mom says that when she found the elk tooth dress at the Glenbow Museum 25 years ago, she also found Sikotan's amulet in a box containing dozens of other baby cord amulets. Sikotan's English name was tagged to both the dress and the amulet, Mary Theresa Crying Head. When mom pressed the amulet between her fingers she could feel her grandmother and great grandmother's umbilical cord still inside.

Mom was a nursing aid at the Indian Hospital in Cardston at the time. She went to the museum to physically assist the elders who were brought there to help the curators obtain more information on their Blackfoot artifacts. She said that the storage area was like a maze of wall sized cabinets filled to capacity with the belongings of our people. Mom and the other people there to assist the elders stood still and silent as the curators opened one cabinet after another. They saw rattles, whistles, ceremonial clothing and headdresses, medicine shields, pipes and bundles. Cabinet after cabinet held more Kainai history: children's clothing, men's clothing, dolls, weapons, moccasins, tipis, story robes, winter counts, the list went on and on. Mom asked the curators where the elk teeth dresses were located. She said that as her and the curator approached the cabinets that held all these women's dresses, the doors of the cabinet were already open. Sikotan's dress was in there, in the first drawer mom pulled out.

Mom stood by the dress taking off the white gloves that were mandatory in the museum's collection area and started counting all the elk teeth, running her fingers along the stitching, wanting so badly to put the dress on, to take it home. She found several strands of long gray hair stuck in the fastenings of the elk teeth and delicately placed them inside one of the white gloves, then the gloves into her pocket.

One of the elders cried out that they had found their baby cord amulet and mom went over to her. In a long rectangular metal box lay dozens of amulets; one of them back around the neck of its owner. That elder who found them started pulling out the rest of them and reading out the few amulets that had names printed on them. One of the names, Mary Theresa Wells, was the English name of my great grandma Sikotan.

Mom says that she returned to the cabinet that held her grandma's dress. There was an item card sitting next to it and she turned it over. The owners name Mary Theresa Wells, was printed on it, as well as the person who sold it to the museum, Annie Crying Wolf.

My name would be called next. I took my grandma Annie's moccasins from under my

arms and dropped them to the floor. I removed my shoes with my feet and bent over to pull on the moccasins. "Mary Stands Alone," they called out and I stood up. I made my way toward the stage, the elk teeth under my robe clicking together with each step, people clapping and several camera flashes coming from the back of the auditorium where my mom and grandma were sitting. I went up the seven steps to the top looking across the stage floor to the president of the U of C who waited for me to accept my degree. I stopped and stood still for a moment.

It was my grandma Annie who sold the dress to the museum. A decision that she tells me over and over will never stop hurting in her. It was a decision she had to make at that time in her life. Just out of boarding school, her mother Sikotan and grandma Appanii both since passed away, she married my grandpa John Crying Wolf at the age of 16. Grandma had inherited Sikotan's elk tooth dress and she says that she would wear it around the house all the time.

In those days grandma says there was more poverty, more poverty and desperation. With four kids and another baby on the way, grandma and grandpa started selling off the few valuable things that they owned; livestock, farming equipment, furniture, and Sikotan's elk tooth dress.

It was a teacher and the priest from St. Mary's who brought the men from the museum over to my grandparents place. They were bringing them around the reserve because these men were looking for things to put on display in their Banff museum. They saw my grandma wearing her dress as she served them the little food and tea they had in their cupboards and offered her \$70 for her dress. Grandma says that the \$70 she got for her dress was enough to get them by with food for another two winter months.

My mom never left that museum empty handed. Her and the elder who found the baby cord amulets would not leave without them. It was 1988 and the museum was getting ready to display their biggest exhibit of Aboriginal artifacts for the Calgary Olympics. That whole group of elders mom was with were upset and angry at what they had to leave behind and they all refused to leave without the two amulets. I guess the curators let them go, so as not to cause any controversy at the opening of their big exhibit. So they left, mom with Sikotan's amulet around her neck, and the elders determined to get back all of our ancestors belongings.

It seemed like forever that I stood on that stage at the top of the steps, but it was only a few seconds. It took me only a few seconds to make up my mind to do what I did. I took off my purple graduation robe, pulling it over my head to get it off. The clapping died down instantly and I could hear people talking and some people snickering. The robe was off and I hung it over

my right arm in front of me and continued on to the podium. I stood next to the president and accepted my degree, taking it from her as she gave a faint, polite smile. I had on my family's elk tooth dress, though not the dress that was made for my great grandmother Sikotan, which was still locked up in the storage spaces of the museum. Instead I was wearing the elk tooth dress that my mom and grandma had spent that past year making me. What I did have that belonged to my great grandmother Sikotan was the baby cord amulet. Inside it Appanii and Sikotan's umbilical cord, worn to keep the ties of mother and daughter strong.