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Age: 24

Cowichan Tribes

Port Coquitlam, BC

Land Warmed By The Sun

My eyes were shut so tightly that I could see tiny shapes appear in blues and yellows on my eyelids. My hands clenched the top of my rolled up wool blanket as I lay in bed waiting for sunrise. This would be my last day here at St. Mary's Mission and I couldn't understand how to feel. I had spent 10 years learning the white ways and I was thankful for my knowledge but my heart ached and longed to be with my family.

There were other girls, older and younger, than me who hated everything here. They hated because of what was taken from us and they felt injustice in the way we were treated. I watched their anger build through the years and then die like a wounded animal will do when its heart is no longer in the fight.

I am always alone, I never join the other girls when they talk, I just watch. Now leaving I can see that I know everyone, but no one knows me. I think maybe I will belong better with my family. Maybe they are watchers too. I realized suddenly that they don't know me either.

Because I am sixteen now, I can't go to school at St. Mary's. I was only in school to learn white ways so I can become a good wife. That's what I understood from the others. I don't think I want to be a wife, I don't know what a 'wife' is supposed to do back home.

I arrived at last to the place of my birth. My Mother came toward me and her eyes were wild with astonishment. I had seen this moment in my head for 10 years and as it happened, I watched it as though I wasn't there. She took my hands and shook them in hers; she was much older than I remembered. I walked to the house that I had memories

of leaving as a child, 6 years old. I thought it would feel different, I thought I would be so happy, but the fear of what I didn't know or understand overtook me and I was scared.

I had 3 older brothers who stayed with my Mother. They were much older, in their 30's, and the biggest men I had ever seen. I didn't feel any connection to them and I could see that they felt none to me. All three of them were there when I arrived, they said nothing and I followed along. I looked down at my shaking hands and shoved them quickly into my pockets. Did they hate me? Do they think I am white now?

That night dinner was being prepared and I watched my Mother shuffle around the kitchen and over tile floor that was thick with dirt. I wanted to clean it for her; in school nothing could ever be dirty like this. I stood up and took a broom from out of the corner in my hands. She looked at me in a blank sort of way and as I put the broom to the floor she took it from me with one sweep of her arm. Her hands pressed down on my shoulders as I was put back in my chair. What a strange reaction, why can't I help?

No one spoke English at home very often, most everyone in Quw'utsun' spoke Hul'qumi'num. Again, I was an outsider with almost no understanding of my native language. I thought and dreamed now in the white words. As the days went on in my new life I realized that in school I was an Indian amongst whites and on the reserve I was a white amongst Indians. I never felt bad for myself but I did start to understand why the other girls were so angry that we had been taken. None of us asked to be different but we were always being punished for it.

This new freedom took some getting used to. I waited for instruction but when none came, I realized I was on my own. Eventually, I found what I think my spirit had always been looking for. All these years I knew I was connected to something and now, here it was. All at once my senses came alive and my head swam with amazement and wonder.

The old trees reached high into the air; the branches were so thick I could not see the sky. Moss grew on everything and the ground was soft as I walked though it. The smell lifted

my heart into my throat. I could hardly breathe there was so much air. I touched everything as I found my way through the forest. I thought of my Grandmother who had once told me that many years ago people fell from the sky and created us, they were our ancestors and they lived only in the wilderness of this beautiful place. Today, I understood where I came from.

When the sun came down I went back home. The doors of our house were left open and I could smell food as I approached. My mother stood in front of a small pile of nickels that were placed on the wooden table we ate at. She looked at me, “Come here my beautiful baby” her hand out and her face encouraging. She piled some of the nickels into my hand and we left for the big house.

I could feel the drumming as we came close to this huge building in the middle of the reserve. I had a feeling that something was about to happen to me but I didn't know what. As we entered through the heavy cedar doors I was deafened by the song that poured out of the people inside. I followed closely to my Mother and tried to copy her actions. We handed out money to the elders and to the families who had stayed here during the spring.

Around the fire they danced. There were masks and feathers, everyone was singing and chanting. Their voices went high and then low. I felt their spirits penetrate my heart; it was unstoppable as the smoke carried their voices through the holes in the roof. They pounded the ground with their feet as they switched directions and kept low to floor like warriors in a hunt. I wanted to join, I wanted to be a warrior, and my eyes were alive with passion.

Sitting in this huge building up high on the benches, with all of these Indians, made me feel safe. The 13 tribes that made up Quw'utsun' were all here supporting each other and showing respect. I didn't know that people could live like this. I was so proud, in this moment, that I was a part of this place where all was spiritual and respectful. This was not a white world.

As we left the big house I could smell the smoke in my hair and on my clothes, I was alive, and I was Quw'utsun'! We walked home with my Mother's friend. The air was humid and night brought a damp chill away from the fire. I grasped my arms, one in the other as we walked. Running from behind a girl caught up to us with the biggest smile I had ever seen. She had long brown hair that was matted at the top of her head. Her body was small and lean but her feet were big and her sandals flopped in the dirt as she ran. She looked at me as though she was happy to see me, I couldn't see why, who was she?

Her mother introduced us and she started telling me about her family and how they danced every week at the big house. She grabbed my arm tightly and shook it; I could feel her fingernails stick into my skin. "Where's your jacket?" she insisted. I told her about how I had nothing to wear because I was at St. Mary's and we wore uniforms there. I was surprised when she told me she had attended a residential school too, but it had been closed by the government a few months back. She took off her jacket, a grey and white wool sweater with an eagle woven into the back. "It's yours now" she said grinning from ear to ear.

As I stepped carefully through the marsh of this wetland I heard every sound that made this moment. My wool jacket gripped my body and rubbed my neck to make it itchy. I felt that this jacket was my right of passage. It was a token of my proud Indian heritage, which had come to be familiar to me little by little. The air was warm and heavy in my lungs and the sun came down on my face cleansing my spirit.

Suddenly, geese flew up from the marsh. Straight into the air they went, darting together in every direction. They swooped back and fourth and I was captured in their noise. My arms shot up into the air, I held them there feeling the spirit of the birds. I had felt this feeling before, so powerful and beautiful; they were like the people of Quw'utsun'. That day I could not speak to the birds, but they spoke to me.

I learned that summer about the people I was meant to be with all those years and I was so proud. No one could ever take this away from me now. I felt that I was a whole person in my heart, nothing missing to wonder about. My Mother told me that Quw'utsun', in our language, means 'land warmed by the sun', but I know this land is warm because of the people who live here.