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Shysie, Silent Little One

“It happened so long ago,” said Huyana Crowfoot as she sat by the window with an afghan over her lap. “My daughter was so beautiful, she was a healthy baby with dark hair and eyes and the light brown skin that runs in my family,” she said with a look in her eyes that I had never seen before this visit.

The beauty in her face dropped as the first tear fell from her cheek. The calm room seemed to settle as her voice quivered “Then they took her,” were the last words she spoke before our conversation was over. I finished my tea and left the house after a pleasant good-bye. This was my third visit to the elder’s home.

Huyana was a woman of few words, but I knew that the words she spoke were important. So I listened. Every visit to Huyana’s home I brought my notebook and would wait patiently to hear the rest of her story of how the 60’s scoop changed her life. From the early 60’s to mid 80’s thousands of Native children were adopted away from their families and communities. Huyana’s heart has been broken for the past forty-two years.

The next morning I prepared for another visit, I put some loose herbal tea in a tiny jar and wrapped some smoked fish in a red cloth napkin. Once in the village I walked up to the weathered house where I had been the day before. Huyana sat in the same chair and I could see her silhouette through the living room window.

As always, I knocked on the door just hard enough to make a sound and then opened the door and let her know that it was me. I turned on the stove to boil some water and asked Huyana if there was anything she would like me to do.

“Just the tea is fine, but remember I am a diabetic, no sugar,” she answered.

Every time I make her tea I am reminded about her diabetes, but it makes me happy that she is taking care of herself. After the tea steeped, mine stronger than hers, I sat down and waited for Huyana to speak. Right after I sat down on the couch, I grabbed a small spoon and began stirring my tea that was in a dainty cup with a frail handle.

“I never gave her a name,” she said softly, “when I think of her I call her Shysie, silent little one. I call her that because I never heard her voice.”

I looked up from my tea and for the first time in my journalism career I was lost for words. So I could only speak through my eyes letting her know that it was safe to tell me her story.

In 1964 Huyana and her boyfriend, Dyami, found out that they were pregnant. The young couple was excited for the birth of their first child. “I was such a careful mother while I was pregnant, I only ate healthy foods like fish, meat and vegetables. I loved my baby so much,” said Huyana with a little crack in her voice, “and I still love her today, who ever she is.”

Huyana and Dyami witnessed other couples in the village losing children to the social workers and government authorities. One day Huyana’s cousin lost her child to the workers and warned her to be careful. “All I could do was hold my stomach and cry. I promised my baby that I would not lose her,” she whispered faintly.

I wiped my eyes as discretely as I could and waited for Huyana to finish. There was a long silence in the room and I did not know whether to ask her questions or to leave. I held up my teacup and tilted back my head to get the last drop of tea. I placed my hand on the arm of the couch and was about to stand up when I was suddenly stopped.

“Where are you going? I have more to tell you,” Huyana said.

My back rested against the couch again and I with my eyes I told her to continue. Huyana went into labour in early September in 1964. By her side was her mother and boyfriend. She could not wait to see the child that she had felt inside her and already loved so much. Her labour was painful and long, but “worth every moment,” she said.

When her daughter was born they wrapped her up and let Huyana hold and feed her just once. After the long afternoon, Huyana fell asleep and in the evening she awoke only to find that her daughter had been taken away and she would never see her again.

“Dyami and I cried and cried. We loved our daughter and we would have been such a great family,” Huyana said as tears streamed down her face and slid through the wrinkles in her cheeks.

The government authorities tried to tell the young couple that they had consented to the adoption of their unnamed daughter. The two fought for their daughter, but nothing ever happened. “They told me that that if she went to another family she could be provided for better. They thought that our people could not raise a child properly,” she said. The fiery anger in her eyes dried her tears of sadness, but not mine.

Huyana and Dyami split up in 1967, they reminded each other of the daughter that they lost to the 60’s Scoop so they never spoke again.

Again I sat in silence waiting for her to begin again, but she did not. Huyana told me that that was unfortunately where her story ended. She sat by the window with her afghan everyday waiting for the daughter she called Shysie to walk by. “If I ever saw her I wonder if I would know if it was her, maybe she has walked past me before and I may have missed my opportunity,” she said.

As I cleaned up the cups from the tea, she began to stare out of the window again and I knew that it was time for me to leave. So I handed her the smoked fish and thanked her for her time.

Once at home I sat with the everlasting image of Shysie in my head. She would be 42 years old and probably have a family of her own. I looked at my notes from my visits with Huyana and some research that read:

70 per cent of the children taken from the Native community were placed into the homes of Non-Native people. Over 11,000 status Indian children were adopted from 1960-1990. The real numbers will never be truly known because of the adoption of the Native children without status was never recorded.

I re-read this over and over and each time I felt the sadness that Huyana carried with her. As I wrote this elder's story of pain I thought about her daughter. I wrote my article for Shysie so if she ever read it she would know that her family had never forgotten.

Huyana waited to read her story in the newspaper. When it came out, on a Tuesday morning, she sat and read it in her chair in front of the same window with the afghan on her lap.