

Elise Bilodeau

The Potlatch and the Smile

"What is a potlatch?" I innocently inquired after my mother explained to my family that we will be travelling to her homeland of Kitamaat, British Columbia in a few days. It was an emotional time for my mother as the news of her late grandmother, Granny Irene, was still fresh in her mind. She took a deep breath and explained that it was a ceremonial ritual of our people, whom I know little about, that is performed after the passing of an elder. She explained that the word "potlatch" originated from the Chinook Jargon, meaning "to give away" or "a gift." Her explanation began to confuse me as I could not comprehend how Granny's passing had anything to do with giving things away. From that point on the level of intrigue within me began to surface. Although sorrows filled my heart with Granny's passing, it also bred the opportunity for me to uncover the history and culture that I have been sheltered from all these years. Due to my family being located in Alberta and my culture and history being left behind in British Columbia, I felt oblivious; a part of me was missing.

It was the morning of our arrival. After twelve hours of driving with my two brothers and father I had plenty of time to prepare and research the spiritual ritual I was about to encounter. My mother had gone down a few days earlier to participate in the process that occurs immediately after Granny's passing. She called and told me that promptly after Granny's passing her and the other girls that are a part of the immediate family must go out and buy Granny a whole new outfit, from her undergarments to her shoes and dress. As this information soaked into my brain she continued by stating that the living room at Auntie Mary's house has been cleared out and filled with chairs to become an "open house" to the residents of the town. It is here that Granny will be staying for the next 3 days with an open casket allowing anyone who wishes to pay their respects to do so. As she talked I absorbed the information with the intentions of writing it down after. Then something very interesting caught my attention. She exclaimed, "There is a night watcher that is hired, allowing the family to sleep without Granny being alone." I was so intrigued that at that moment I knew, this is the week, the part of me that is missing will be found.

Standing in Auntie Mary's living room amongst the villagers paying their respects, I stood before my great grandmothers' casket. As I peered in, memories flooded my mind. How even though I have only met Granny twice, we made the most of our time together. The image of her showing me, as a young girl, the smoke house where she smoked salmon was clear as crystal. Or when she gave my brothers and I some money every day to go down to the store and buy some bubble gum. The image of our laughter together when the gum got stuck to her dentures flooded my vision. Just then my memories got cut short as my Uncle Tom proclaimed it was time for the sending of Granny's needs in heaven. I did not know what this meant so I followed the crowd to the backyard. It was an image I had never seen before. I watched enthused as Granny's immediate family burned food, linens, toiletries, clothing and everything she would need to live comfortably up in heaven. I watched as her slippers went up in flames but content in knowing my Granny will be comfortable and happy watching down on me.

"Time to get up Elise, today we say goodbye to Granny," my father whispered softly that morning. We got dressed in our best clothes and were off to Auntie Mary's house. Granny's casket was loaded up and we began to walk. All through the town of Kitamaat, British Columbia, with immediate family and friend's right behind the vehicle followed by others from the town, we walked. It was an emotional walk that I will never forget, as Granny went through her town for the last time. We continued to walk up to the top of the hill where her grave site had already been dug beside her late husband. As she was lowered in, she was united once again with the love of her life. We watched as each pile of dirt one by one was thrown on top of her casket setting Granny free to live happily with her husband in heaven. We each set a wild flower on her grave site and said our own individual goodbyes. I told Gran that I would see her again someday and I promised to bring bubble gum with me.

After the hard part was over it was time to celebrate. We enter the town hall and sit down for a feast of stew. My mother explained that this was the part of the potlatch where the "giving" takes place. My mother, father, brothers and I were called up and introduced to the whole town. I stood there and smiled, proud to be Gran's great granddaughter as she is respected by so many. Granny's children had prepared a feast of stew for the whole town. We had a choice between stew and clam chowder being served from huge bowls. My mother's cousins then went around and gave each person a signified number of apples and oranges as well as some dish cloths. Then they proceeded to call upon the families that have helped out in any way during this hard time and gave them gifts such as pots and pans, towels, linens, food and other necessities to thank them. Once the gifts were given and the meal was over they played a memorial power point of Granny's life. Seeing a few pictures of myself with Gran when I was young was an emotional time for me. As a few tears trickled down my face they played live music in the Haisla native tongue, it was beautiful and moving despite the separation of our languages. The family said a few speeches and then the opportunity was given to anyone who wishes to tell a story or fond memory of Granny. It was the joy and experience of the townspeople celebrating my great grandmother fondly with smiles and tears that brought a smile to my face.

As the potlatch ceremony came to a close and goodbyes were said, I could not help but feel moved from the emotional experience I just encountered. I shed one last sorrowful tear for Granny and wiped it away with a smile. A smile whose incentive was that Gran was smiling back at me from heaven knowing I have filled the hole that preceded this potlatch celebration. She knows that the ending of one life created the fulfillment of another and a part of my history is now a part of me. I will forever embrace my culture having Granny know that every smile is for her.

Authors Statement

My name is Elise Bilodeau and I chose to write about my experience at my late great grandmothers potlatch because it was a cultural experience that I never even knew existed. To be a part of this ceremony as being immediate family to my great grandmother was an even greater honor because it gave me a firsthand take, from the inside, on my own culture that I have missed out on my whole life. Being away from my culture had left me curious and eager to take in this experience. I also chose this event due to how it has changed me. I was left in the dark when it came to my Aboriginal culture and this experience opened up doors and opportunities for me to learn how to embrace my culture. When I heard about this contest I instantly knew I would write about the Potlatch. It was a defining moment in my life where I finally had an idea of who I really was and where I came from. I had always known I was Aboriginal but this was the first moment on when I really had an idea of what being Aboriginal meant. It was a time filled with emotion that showed me that life never really ends because the end of Granny's life passed on so much life to me. My dream is to hopefully inspire others with this story, if it gets published, to find their culture and learn from it. If they are in the dark like I was, there is so much to gain by learning about who you are and where you come from. It is a comforting feeling knowing who you are after being oblivious for so long. This is the emotion and feeling that I wrote this paper with.