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Métis Nation of Saskatchewan

17 years old

A Piece of My Past

Grandma's house reeks of cigarettes, bananas, and old people. Muriel, my cranky great aunt, gawks at me from across her knitting. Grandma comes into the sitting room with a tray full of year old biscuits and weak tea. She sets the tray down on a side table, and squishes right up to me.

"So how are you Sweetie? You almost never visit these days," she says smiling, grabbing my hand.

Feeling a little uncomfortable I say, "Yeah, I've been busy at school. Which is why I'm here, we're doing this family history project thing; I have to find out about my identity and who I am."

Looking up from her knitting, Muriel glares at me and mutters under her breath, "How nice."

"Muriel!" Grandma chides, handing her a cup of tea and a biscuit. "Well Lena, there are actually some interesting stories about your ancestor's on my fathers' side-"

Muriel snaps, "Doreen, you know we don't talk about that side of the family. " Grandma is silent for a moment and the air seems tense.

"Oh yes, I forgot, how silly of me." Grandma laughs sarcastically and takes a sip of her tea.

This might be interesting, the forbidden zone, "Why don't you talk about that side of the family?" I ask.

"Oh, it's just some silly old traditions, you wouldn't understand!" Muriel cuts in, trying to end the 'distasteful' discussion.

Grandma pushes on undeterred, "Your great-grandmother, Elizabeth McNevin, was born in the police barracks at Prince Albert on the night of the battle of Fish Creek,"

"Why was she born in the police barracks?" I ask, sipping my tea.

"Because of Louis Riel; he led the Natives and Métis into the North West Rebellion" Muriel sniffs out, looking positively disgusted, "It wasn't safe for white people." I'm getting excited.

This is the kind of stuff you actually learn about in school. My history is turning out to be way less boring than I thought.

Glancing at my watch I realize I'm going to be late. "I should get going. My friend and I are going shopping." Grandma walks me to the door, thanking me for dropping by. Muriel comes over and stands by me, she smirks and points outside.

"I don't think you'll be leaving today," She says, before heading back to her tea.

Grandma looks out and exclaims "You're not going out in weather like that." I sigh and call my friend to cancel our plans.

Later that night I toss and turn on Grandma's ratty old couch. Finally I give up and head into the kitchen for a midnight snack. I open the cupboard to get a cup. I swear I see someone walk behind me in the reflection of the glasses. But when I turn, the room is empty.

"That was freaky," I whisper to myself, holding the glass close to my chest.

BANG!

I jump and scream at the sound, dropping the glass. It shatters across the floor. I examine the dark kitchen, searching for the noise. The door leading to the basement isn't closed anymore. I step over my mess to the door. I stand there, uncertain if I should really go down. It's pitch black and a cold breeze wafts up. I race back to the couch, for a blanket before plunging into the dark underground. My hand searches for the light switch and finds it. The bulb flickers for a moment before settling into a weak glow.

Peering around, it looks like someone took a whirlwind and set it loose. There are stacks of boxes and bags and piles of loose papers. I shiver quietly, and for a moment I forget what I'm doing here. All of a sudden, the person from the reflection flashes in my mind. I relax when everything seems alright. Turning to go back upstairs, I trip over a small wooden box and fall flat on my face.

"Ow!" groaning, I sit up, "Where did that come from?" I glare at the thin box. An ancient piece of twine is the only thing keeping the top of the box from falling off.

I pick it up and give the twine a tug. It crumbles into pieces as the top of the box topples off. It's stashed full of old yellowing papers. I glance over the top page. It's a letter from someone named Jane Robertson to her father. I shuffle through the other papers until I find a pedigree chart. I see my Grandmothers' name and follow it back to Elizabeth McNevin, who was born in 1885. While I'm trying to remember if that was the same date as the Riel Rebellion, I notice a different sort of

name. Elizabeth's grandmothers', name was Nehekawenequen, an Aboriginal name! I set the paper down, shocked. According to this chart I'm a Métis.

I drop the papers, startled when I hear my name called from upstairs. I rush to pick everything up before bolting up the stairs, holding the box tightly in both hands. "Grandma, look at this!" I say, setting the box down on the table. She looks from me to the shards of glass and back again. "What happened?" she asks.

"I'm Métis!" I say excitedly, "Here look at this!" I pick up the pedigree chart and show it to her. Grandma lowers herself into a kitchen chair and begins to read.

Grandma stifles a cry, "Thank you Lena! I can't believe that you found this! I thought Auntie had destroyed all of our family history!" Muriel shuffles into the kitchen complaining about the racket. She stops short when she sees the box. Shrieking she hobbles over to grab the papers. But Grandma holds them out of her reach.

"No! Not anymore Muriel!" she exclaims, "This has to end sometime." Muriel glowers at her sister, but steps back. Outside the wind howls, as the two old ladies stare each other down. Afraid to break the silence, I whisper, "So am I really a Métis?"

"Distantly, but yes, you're a Métis." Grandma says, "And so are we!" She gives her sister another long look.

"It's not something to be proud about. Métis are good for nothing rebels!" Muriel hisses.

"You're wrong!" I shout out, surprising all of us, "It does matter! They're part of me! A part of my history. I...I...I'm proud to be a Métis! And that doesn't make me less of a person, or weaker than anyone else! I'm not good for nothing. We should all be proud of our ancestors. Without them we wouldn't be here!" All Muriel can do is stand there and gape. Then she quietly turns and walks out of the kitchen.

Grandma leans over and touches my cheek, "You're probably just like her."

"Who?"

"Nehekawenequen! Her name means 'leader of the women' in Cree."

"Really? That's so cool!" I say, finally getting the broom and dustpan out. As I sweep up the glass I tell my Grandma, "I think someone wanted me to find that box," I explain about the apparition I saw and the door banging.

Nodding Grandma leans down and picks up a larger piece of glass. She holds it out to me and says, "Now you know a little bit more about who you are and where you come from." I take the

shard and gaze at it. Just like the glass was smashed, so was my history. But now I've got some pieces put together, pieces that I could have never even imagined an hour ago. I smile to myself, knowing that tomorrow I'd be in the basement or at the library looking for more pieces of my past.

Author's Statement

What I chose to write about cannot be found in a textbook or in a newspaper. It is the story of my family and my history. Some elements have been fictionalized, but the heart of the story remains true. I chose to write this story because I believe that we, as Canadians should be proud of the rich Native history that this country has.

I felt compelled to write about my family history and the connection we have to the Riel Rebellion is because, like the glass that is broken in the story, my family history was broken. I have ancestors that were ashamed to be Métis and avoided speaking about their past. Because of this many records of my history were not kept and written down. This has made it difficult for my family to learn about our past. I wrote this story to help repair a little piece of my family history.

Another reason why I chose this portion of history to write about is because before, during, and after the Riel Rebellion many Métis were ashamed of their heritage. Unfortunately even now, some are still experiencing this shame. This has been a struggle Canada has dealt with for many years. However I believe that by recognizing our connection to Canada within our past and in our lives right now that we can try to heal the some of the wounds that have been suffered. I wrote this story to fix another piece of Canada's history and future.