

Anishinaabemowin

It's surprisingly quiet in our room. I can hear another baby's cry down the hallway and the nurses chatting at their station, but my sweet girl doesn't make a sound. Justin has taken Mom and Dad to get coffee and for now it's just the two of us.

"Ella," I whisper.

I tell her I don't really like hospitals, that she wasn't even supposed to be born in this one, but here we are. Fate is funny that way. This is where we needed to be. It's where Ella's Koko, my Gram, wanted us to be.

"You're named after her, you know," I say.

I promise Ella that I will teach her our language, that I will help her keep the memory of her Koko alive. After all, this is where I promised myself that I would never stop speaking Anishinaabemowin.

"She would've been so happy to meet you," I say.

Niinimooshe. Sweetheart.

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I was eight the last time I saw my Gram. Before that I hadn't seen her for a couple of years but we talked on the phone every week. Gram told me once that she had picked out my name because Mom and Dad couldn't decide. She gave me her middle name, Mae. She said it kept us connected even though we were so far apart.

I hadn't talked to Gram for a while because Mom said she wasn't feeling well. It was usually just Auntie Ada that Mom talked to on the phone. A couple of days before Mom told me we were going to Ontario to visit I heard her talking to Gram.

“Aanii? Aanii?” Gram said when Mom let me say hi. I had to put my hand over the receiver to ask Mom what Gram meant. Mom told me it was bedtime and to tell Gram that I loved her.

Aanii. Hello.

When Mom and Dad tucked me in to bed that night I asked why Gram didn’t recognize me on the phone.

“Mae, Gram is sick,” Mom told me. She said we were going to Ontario because Gram needed to be with all of her family. I asked if she was going to be better by the time we got there and Mom started to cry. Dad said it was going to be okay.

I asked Mom about what Gram had said to me on the phone. “Anishinaabemowin,” she told me. It was the language Mom always switched to when she spoke to Auntie Ada on the phone while I was in the room. Secrets I wasn’t allowed to know.

Bizaan. Quiet.

Dad grew up in Vancouver and only spoke English. I spoke a bit of French at school, but there was no mystery or fun in knowing something almost everyone else knew. I told her I wanted to learn the language. I was going to surprise Gram. Mom wiped away her tears and said Gram would love that.

Nokomis. Grandmother.

When we flew to Ontario Mom let me sit next to the window. She told me it was because I was on my best behaviour. She didn’t know when Dad said goodbye to us at the gate he had told me that Mom would give me the seat because she was terrified of the mountains. I love the mountains. A skyline without mountains is

boring. Dad always said that if Mom had grown up around the mountains like we had, she would have a better appreciation for them. Mom always said, “No thank you.”

Wajiwan. Mountains.

Mom had printed off sheets of Ojibwe words from the internet before we left home. The spelling looks a bit confusing when you're used to seeing words in English. There's a lot of *aa*, *ii*, *oo*, and *zh* sounds. Some words I was able to figure out on my own.

Waabigwan. Flower.

Niibin. Summer.

More often than not though, I needed extra help. During our flight I interrupted Mom's movie so many times she eventually gave up and turned off the screen.

“How do you say this?” I asked, pointing to a long word on one of my papers.

“Miini... baash...” She paused. “You don't need to know that word.” She pushed back the paper at me. I pushed it back towards her.

“I want to know,” I told her. “You know how to say everything.”

“Speaking it is different from reading it, my girl. I speak it because I remember it, we never wrote anything,” she said.

I asked Mom what she remembered about the word. She closed her eyes and was quiet for so long, I thought she was falling asleep. Then she smiled. That warm smile full of memories you forgot were tucked away. Mom told me about her own Gram, who she had called her Koko. Koko used to watch Mom and her siblings when

Gram and Grandpa worked in the tobacco fields. The kids loved when Koko came to stay with them because she was an amazing cook.

Miinibaashkimasiganibiitoosijiganibadagwiingweshiganibakwezhigan.

Blueberry pie.

I still can't pronounce that word all at once like Mom did. She laughed when she finally managed to say it. I can still see the smile that spread across her face when she told me about her Koko.

It was a three-hour drive from the airport to Southampton and I was half asleep by the time we got to Gram's house. Before we went inside Mom pulled me over to the middle of the front yard.

"Look up, Mae," she said.

The first thing that will forever come to mind when I think about being in Ontario is the stars. I could spend the rest of my nights staring up at them and they would never bore me. Where Mom comes from there are no skyscrapers, streetlamps or smog. The only lights during the night are from houses that sporadically line the roads, and the random car that passes by. Everything else is star shine.

"It's good to be home," Mom said.

Anangoog. Stars.

I asked Mom if we could go in and see Gram, and she told me that Gram wasn't inside. She was at a hospital. Mom hugged me tight and said that we would see her tomorrow. I watched her stare up at the stars for a little while longer.

I didn't like sleeping in Gram's bed without her there. I stared at the silhouettes of pictures on her walls, and I pulled her handmade quilts closer around me. I fell asleep listening to Mom talk to her sisters down the hall. More secrets.

"Goodnight Gram," I said to the room.

Bawajigaywin. Dream.

The next morning our entire family packed in to four cars and we headed off to the hospital in London. Mom spoke to Uncle Peter in Anishinaabemowin while we rode along in his truck, and I told him that someday I would understand what they were saying. I told him I was going to surprise Gram once we got to the hospital.

"You know, your mom and me, we didn't even speak English when we were around your age. Not until the Agency sent us off to school." I looked at Mom and she nodded. I stared down at the words I was practicing in my notebook. Mom struggled teaching me simple words while we were on the plane. How was it that at one time Ojibwe was all she spoke? What was it like to not speak English?

"What's an Agency?" I asked. The truck was quiet except for the country music playing quietly on the radio. Uncle Peter glanced over and patted my head.

"Nothing you need to worry about right now, my girl," he answered. "Did your Mom teach you how to count yet?"

I told him I could count to five in our language, so he taught me the rest of the numbers up to ten. We practiced on the horses in the fields along the stretch of highway.

Inzhishenh. Mother's brother.

The waiting area we sat in had a small TV and some books on a shelf but my cousins and I stayed in our chairs. Mom and the adults had gone to talk to a doctor. I practiced telling Gram that I was learning our language. I could say it on my own without looking at my paper.

“When do we get to see Gram?” I asked my cousin. She held me close but didn’t answer and I started to wonder whether Gram was going to kiss me goodnight that evening. Why was I the only one excited to see her?

Ningotaaj. Afraid.

When the adults all came back Auntie Ada said it was time to say goodbye to Gram. My cousins started to cry and so did I. I had just got there, I didn’t want to say goodbye yet. Mom led me down the hallway and pulled me aside just before Gram’s room.

“Do you remember the last time you saw Gram?” Mom asked. Gram flew to Vancouver for my fifth birthday party. I had sat in her lap the entire night. Mom grabbed hold of my hand.

“Machines are helping her right now because she is very sick.” Mom paused. Uncle Peter came out of Gram’s room and stood by the door. I had never seen an adult cry before.

“She might look a little different, but she’s still Gram. Okay?” Mom squeezed my hand. I looked down at the sheet of paper where I had written *Gram, I’m learning to speak Ojibwe.*

“Can we go see Gram now?” I asked.

Eya’. Yes.

We walked in to her room. My grip tightened around Mom's hand. Soft light peeked through the curtains. The bedside tables were covered in flowers and cards. The room was quiet except for the sounds of two machines. One was Gram's heartbeat, beeping a slow and steady calm. I slowed my breathing to match the other machine helping Gram breathe. Mom led me over to a chair beside Gram and I asked if I could hold her hand. Mom nodded and let go. Gram looked so small in her bed.

"Aanii, Gram," I said to her. I waited for her to open her eyes. When she didn't, I asked Mom if she could still hear me. Mom squeezed my shoulder.

"Bangii eta go ninitaa-ojibwem," I said, staring down at my paper. "Nimaamaa is teaching me more." The heart monitor continued to beep. Gram breathed in and out with the machine. I got up from my chair and kissed her. I told her I loved her.

"Gi zah gin, Gram."

There is no word for goodbye in our language.

Baamaapii. Until later.

~

I place my finger in Ella's little hand, she grips it tight. When I look up, Mom is at the door. She smiles and walks over, her hand brushes over Ella's small tuft of hair and she breathes in the soft baby smell that I can't get enough of. In that moment I feel my Gram. I can't see her but I know she's there. Mom nods at me, I know she feels her too.

Ella's eyes are open when I look down at her. "Gi zah gin, Ella," I say. I look out to the openness of our room. "Gi zah gin."

Miigwech. Thank you.