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25 years old

Clearly I Am Home

This summer is particularly a dry one, and all the dust that's around is killing me. It masks the terrain like a smokescreen, as if nature does not want me to see what's around. As I grab my bags, I pick a quarter and a dime out of my pocket and walk to the phone booth. Looking around, I noticed not much had changed during my ten-year absence. The truck stop/greyhound station/restaurant/convenience store still looked the same. Even the people working the pumps looked the same. They eye me suspiciously through sunglasses, observing me, or so it seems. Never mind being status, I definitely don't look aboriginal. As I get to the phone and pick up the receiver, the workers looked away at the same time, as if to say, yeah yeah, we know you're not from here. The number I was given for my Kôhkom's place was unfamiliar, and after two tries, I finally got a dial tone.

"Hey?" I do not recognize this voice. Not good.

"Uh, hi. Is um, Irene there?"

"Yeah, she's in town right now. I don't know when she'll be back though." Alarms rise in my body. I quell the bad feelings.

"Ok, well its her nephew Ben, and when she gets home, could you tell her I'm at the truckstop, and . . . uh to call me?" Before the stranger can answer, a loud car horn goes off behind me.

"MA! Look behind you guy!" I spin around, and see an old, dusty Impala parked across the lot. My cousin James sits in the driver seat waving a hand, and smiling a broad grin. I grab my bags and go towards the car. Relief fills me, and I begin to ease. James gets out of the car, and immediately shakes my hand. Despite growing a foot and gaining a hundred pounds, he still has the same toothy smile. "Man, good to see you! You've grown up! Holy cow! You still play hockey?" I remembered he came to one of my hockey tournaments when I was ten.

“Not so much any more. I play in a ball hockey league though.” I get in shotgun and look for a seatbelt. Upon discovering that there is none, I glance towards my cousin, who looks at me and gives me a wink.

The drive to my Kôhkom’s house was a short ride. I converse with James, asking how he’s doing, and what he is up to. After thirty seconds of this, James looks at me with a cocked eyebrow

“You ok? You’re talking really fast.” I hadn’t noticed the fast-talking, but I am clearly nervous. James just smiles at me, and tells me a story about the richest guy in the town, and how he made his money. However, this distinguished man slighted another man, and created bad blood within the community.

“That’s a good story.” It impressed me at how well my cousin told the story.

“Yeah, got plenty more of those. Almost there though.” As we pull up, I notice quite a few cars lined up the driveway. I gesture to all the cars,

“How many people are in that house?”

“Almost everyone.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Kôhkom and most of the family.”

“Really?” I knew they were waiting. Dad told me this would happen. *Get ready to meet new family Ben.*

I idea that I am going to be the center of attention does not appeal to me, but this was to be expected. I had not visited in a long time. Sadly to say, I am essentially a stranger to some of my family, and its homeland. Dad usually spoke sparingly about his home, but he always maintained the importance of family. Dad was close to his brother Allen and his family who lived in the city. But other than that we were fairly far removed from the family up north. Dad still knew how to speak Cree, and knew his way in the bush. Like riding a bike, I suppose some things you just never forget. The first time I heard him speak Cree was to an elder outside a gas station in Enoch. I was six, and had no idea what he was saying. In retrospect, Dad could speak two languages fluently by time he was six. I’m a little behind I guess.

The second we got out of the car, the front door of the house slammed open, and bolting out comes my Kôhkom. Jeez, for seventy-one she moves fast.

“My boy!!!” She exclaims. I hug my Kôhkom close, enough to smell shampoo and the faint smell of Vick’s Vapor Rub. I hadn’t seen her for over a year, and I forgot how much I missed her. I instantly forgot about the new family I was going to meet, and all the uncertainty about being from the city. We walked into her house, and were greeted by a phalanx of my family. As the cheerful greetings go around, some faces and names I recognize instantly. My Uncle Jim, Aunts Clara, Dorothy, Pauline, Lily, and many cousins. Some of my cousins have children of their own now, and there seems to be twenty people I don’t know. By time things settle down, I notice the absence of my cousin Paul. I figured he would be here for sure. His mother, my aunt Donna, was an alcoholic, and couldn’t take care of her child. Paul has lived with Kôhkom for practically his entire life, and was always moving around in the summer. He lived with us when I was eleven, and it was great.

Soon, the food began to flow, and we were elbow-deep in stew and fry-bread. The smell of the carrots and peas in the thick broth always reminded me of coming back from tobogganing when we came here for Christmas in ’91. A child’s voice cut through my memory, and looking up, I noticed my little cousin Ryan speaking in Cree to Kôhkom. After a quick conversation, she hurries him away, glances at me, and gives me a soft smile. She comes over, and tells me that Ryan was wondering if I was staying for good now. I smile back, and ask Kôhkom, “Can everyone speak Cree?”

“Almost all. The Friendship Center has free classes. They learned fast.” She smiles proudly, and adds, “Your father speaks good Cree too. I’m surprised he hasn’t taught you yet.” I had the same thoughts many times.

“Dad is always busy. I guess he worries more about paying off the house and such.”

“Ma, your father is always out for the money.” I thought about it for a second. Dad did work hard for his family. But he did sacrifice our culture for financial gain. “Your mother has tried to get you to come up, remember? But your father didn’t like the idea of you roaming the rez.” I did remember. I was on summer vacation, and my uncle Allen and his family were traveling up to the reservation to stay for a week. Uncle invited me on, but Dad wanted me to work for his landscaping company. I was upset until I got paid, then I practically forgot about the trip. What did that say about me? I was uncomfortable about that, and wanted to change the subject,

“So, where’s Paulie? I thought he would be here.” Kôhkom shook her head, and just said,

“Moved up north a few months ago.” She looked sad to say, as if she lost Paul for good.

The rest of the day involved visiting, and generally becoming more comfortable at Kôhkoms. Later on James and a few of my cousins took me out to town outside the reservation. Our Aunt Clara lives in town, so we dropped her off on our way in. The town was very small. It was one main street and a few mini-malls. Houses scattered around the main street. A lone bar stood in a lot across from a Saan store. A few gas stations were positioned on both ends of the main strip, and lots of cars were in a Husky station parking lot.

“This is where you hang out?”

James smiled towards me, “Yeah, I’ll show you around, maybe you can pick up some girls with your city charms.” From the backseat, my cousins Richard and Blair were both smiling at me. Over the next hour I was introduced to several of my cousins’ friends, and their girlfriends. Once I loosened up, I began to enjoy myself. Pretty soon it was midnight, and I wanted nothing more than to sleep. James was talking with a girl named Samantha, so Richard and Blair drove me back to Kôhkom’s. Upon arriving, it was abandoned, with only a few lights on. The house seemed empty and cavernous now.

“Hello? James? You bring your cousin back with you?” Her voice seemed to come out of the walls, echoing throughout the house.

“Its me! And yes, I brought him back!” Richard grinned at me as he and Blair went to the fridge. Kôhkom silently shuffled in,

“I was just watching the news. Have any of you eaten since earlier?” Kohkom went to the cupboard and pulled out some bowls. The four of us sat at her dinner table, and told one another our plans for the future. Richard and Blair already worked for the band office, doing landscaping and yard work for the community. Richard was going to move to the city in a year to start college. Blair still had one more year of high school left, so that was his future. I was starting university this coming fall, and looking forward to it. Thanks to my status, my education would be paid for, but I felt guilty, like I was cheating the system. I’m sure there are other potential students in the community that can benefit. As I expressed these thoughts, Kôhkom interrupted me. “Ma, never mind that! You’re family, and you’re part of this community! Just because you don’t live here, or speak Cree doesn’t mean you don’t have the same rights as other family with status.” She made excellent points.

“But how did I get selected to be status?” I didn’t know the specifics towards status eligibility, which also embarrassed me.

“Bill C-31 my boy. Before that, lots of your aunts and uncles didn’t have status. Your Mosôm and I didn’t get married until 1965. Because most of our children were born out of wedlock, they had problems gaining status. Even your father had difficulty. Your aunt Donna had a harder time. She married a white man, lost her status, and her children’s. But when the bill was passed, men and women became equal, so you couldn’t lose your status for marrying a non-status, or being born out of wedlock. Even your cousin Brian didn’t have status until then. Aunt Louise wasn’t married when he was born, so it was always a problem. But that’s how the government did things back then.” I was listening intently, but Blair and Richard looked ready to pass out. This was new stuff to me, but they probably heard it before. Kôhkom laid out a casual game of solitaire in front of her and said, “Even you, my boy. You were born without status.” Those words hit me hard. I had always assumed things were the same. That I was born with my status, and that made me who I thought I was. But this revelation turned me. I didn’t even know my own history. How can I determine where I belong if I don’t know my own history? And it is here that I realize that I was always part of my family, and that my issues of status meant nothing to others. I may have thought myself a stranger, but clearly I am home.

Author’s Statement

In my eyes, this story is more of a narrative than a story. There are elements of truth and fiction, mostly taken from various family visits. Several of my aunts have explained my family history to me, and the more they explained, the more I realized that a huge change in the structure and organization of my family did happen as a result of Bill C-31. Many family members (including myself) gained status in 1985. Being from a sizeable family, many of my relatives are in different stages of life, and some would not be where they are without the benefits gained from becoming a status Indian. I would not be anywhere near post-secondary school if I did not receive benefits for being status Indian. I felt it was important to tell this part of my history. This story is very personal in a sense, because all the characters do represent someone in my family. And like the character, my desire to conform to my family’s ways (both culturally and socially) used to keep me away from certain aspects of family functions. I suppose I would be

embarrassed by any cultural deficiencies. But knowing that for many of my aunts and cousins, a harder road was taken before C-31. They did not have the same benefits growing up. They had deficiencies far worse. Improper education and health care, discrimination, and in some cases, general poverty were aspects of life which I cannot relate to, nor discuss. Bill C-31 helped alleviate some of those deficiencies. Personally, my own life has been shaped around this, and has given me the opportunity to share this story.