

Leah Harvey

Edmonton, AB

Thunderchild First Nation

29 years old

To My Dad:

All the things I wished for the 29 years of my life was to have met you. I think about it almost every day and wonder what my life would have been like if you were in my life. I have many questions about your missing role in my life. About why I was not good enough that you did not stay. I carried a heavy heart towards you. I blamed you for why my life was hard as a child. I blamed you for not being there when I achieved my goals. I blamed you for all the lost love that was never shared between a daughter and a father. I cried when I was brought up to believe you were this horrible person. I grew up carrying hate towards a man I never knew. There is so much I want to say, this letter is only the beginning.

As a young girl I was raised to believe you never cared for me. My mother had carried this anger towards you and took her frustrations out on me. I was the one child who had to take on all the spankings, who had to get the brunt end of my mothers anger. I wet the bed and was severely punished for doing this, I got so good at hiding it that my mother never knew at most times. I was never told much about who my father was and I never did dare ask questions. But only at the rare times in anger when I was told that you were this mean man. I believed everything I heard. I believed you did not care for me and that is why you left. I was young and vulnerable to anything that came my way, but most of all this was when I first became aware of being angry towards someone I never knew.

I was young when I was molested. I do not remember much of my child hood because I blocked most of it out. I hid my body and covered it constantly because of this shame I carried with me. I never told anyone because I thought who would believe me? I started to act out but kept this all in hiding because I knew what would come if my mother found out. I started to steal with my sister and it would be the most ridiculous things we would take. My first time taking a

substance was a valium. I do not remember much of that night, I was only told at what I did. I never felt so embarrassed and ashamed of my actions. I never touched drugs every since. As for the stealing journey, we got caught, handcuffed and walked through a crowded mall. I remember being so embarrassed as well and kept telling my sister to quit crying. Only then sitting in the police station and seeing my mom walk in did it hit me that there is going to be a hard consequence. I never stole again.

I was torn when my two older sisters did not want to live with us any more. I knew why they wanted to leave and would lie awake crying for them. My sisters were everything to me and when they left I was very lonely and sad. I would ask myself yet again, why did they not want to stay for me? My anger started to build towards you. I carried anger towards the people in my life who kept leaving me. I started to hide my resentment with lies. I would only say that everything was ok so people would leave me alone. I got into fights with girls in elementary only because they looked down on me for being Aboriginal. I did not know how to fight back with words only with my fists.

My teenage years were different. I tried to keep myself in school and would work during the summer to have my own money. I rarely talked about myself and always shied away from the spot light. My mom eventually did tell me a little thing about you and that was you played basketball. I tried to get into the sport but never grew that interested in it mainly because I was not good at all. Playing basketball was my way of trying to connect with you. I tried my skills at basketball but ended up slapping a girl in the face by accident and knew I must be doing something wrong. I grew to love Volleyball and became very good at this sport. I joined in all the tryouts, teams and even volleyball nights at the local friendship centers. I was proud of myself when I made the girls volleyball team for two years straight. The one thing I did not enjoy was nobody came to watch me. I so hurt when I found out you were our score keeper for our gold medal game and nobody told me. I remember you shaking my hand after we won, but I still cannot see your face. To this day I feel very proud that you got to watch me play.

I graduated from High School in the year of 2001. I was twenty one years old. It was a big moment of my life for there were times when I felt like giving up. I secretly wished for you to be there. I wanted to have you to be proud of me as well. I grew to know my cousins from your side. They would always show me love and be so happy to always see me. I never once did ever ask about you for fear of what I was going to be told. When they did mention you I acted

like I did not care and would roll my eyes. It was around this time that I heard you were sick. I thought you were just sick and did not know to what extreme. I thought why act like I care when you did not want to be a part of life. I resented you very badly at this time and was so damn angry with you. I would curse you and would hate to hear anything about you.

I found out I was pregnant in October 2005. It was the most happiest times of my life. I was alone when I found out because my fiancé was away on a course at this time. I cried my eyes out and could stop staring at myself in the mirror. I kept repeatedly telling myself "I am going to be a mother, I am going to be a mother". The first person I told was my fiancé and the first thing that came out of his mouth was, "I want to marry you!". I got married that following December. These were the most precious times in my life that I wish you could have been a part of it. I wish I could have given you that honor to walk me down the aisle. I wish you could have given me away. I wish you could have been there for the birth of my daughter. I wish I could have shared all these moments with you.

I went to work one morning and that was when I got that call. I remember it so clearly, I knew something was wrong, I knew you were gone I just needed to hear it. When I was told my whole body went numb and I could not stop crying. My husband had to come and get me at work because I needed help walking. My auntie, your sister called me and told me what had happened to you. That your heart eventually just stopped beating. That you were living with HIV and it eventually took you away. I felt very numb on the drive out to the reserve. I kept crying off and on. I walked into the gym and was surrounded with so much love from your brothers and sisters. It hit me so hard when I walked up to see all these pictures of your face. I cried when I saw that you had pictures of my wedding day and pictures of your only grandchild. I was so overwhelmed that you stayed connected with me even though I never knew you. I found out as well that I was your only child and for the first time saw what a handsome father I had.

We waited for three days for your body to arrive. I grew impatient and angry because they did not release your body until that Monday. I wish I could have sat with you by your coffin, but then my uncle said to everyone "You never knew when Garry was coming or going, he always just showed up". Even up until that day you were just the same. I laid you to rest with a Pendleton blanket and moccasins for your journey home. When we got to the church and I heard that bell ring letting us know you were there, I was so nervous to have you in my presence. I have never cried so hard in my life. I cried for this beautiful man who was loved by so many. I

cried for all my anger and bitterness I held towards you. I cried for my father that I loved so much. I said my goodbye to you with my mom holding me, my daughter beside me and my husband as a pallbearer.

I never knew much about you until the day you died. I was told you were the youngest of thirteen siblings. I was your only baby. I was told that you always thought of me and would always say to your siblings, "I wonder how my baby is doing?". I was told that you were a very good basketball player. I was also told about the hard life you have lived. I was told you lived on the streets and you were homeless up until your passing. My Aunt told me you lived in one of the worst places ever. She told me that you lived in Vancouver East Hastings for seven years and that the only way to get out of there was in a body bag. My aunt also told me about the time she saw you after Vancouver, the first thing you said to her was "I did it, I got back from hell". Before your passing, I found out that you came to the same powwow to see me and your granddaughter. At this point you were very sick so my aunt and uncle had to keep taking you back to the car. I was told that you watched me from a far. I had forgiven you the moment I had my daughter three years ago. If I had known you were there I would have hugged and embraced you. I still carry the thoughts of what if.

The big thing that hit me hard is when I was told that you attended residential school as a young boy. That going to that school changed your life forever. My uncle told me you were never the same and you had a hard time trying to deal with what happened to you in there. They told me you did not want anything to do with that payout they were giving to former students. Dad, I heard that you went through the courts to tell your whole story only to say you did not want the money, that you went through this painful process just to give it to me. While going through the Common Experience Payment (CEP) process of reading your testimonials, that is when I understood the extent of the psychological damage you experienced while attending residential school. I lost my father even before I was born. I had tried so hard not fill my heart with anger and rage for what this evil man had done to you. I now understand and am so honored to have had you as my father. I thank the creator for giving me a strong humble beautiful dad like you, you could have given up so many times but you pushed on, you survived. I honor your memory as well as your spirit that lives on through me and your grandchild.

From your humbled daughter

Author's Statement

My name is Leah Harvey. I am a Plains Cree Women from Thunderchild First Nation located in Saskatchewan. I am currently a full-time student at the University of Alberta. I am planning on going into the combine degree with the Faculty of Natives and the Faculty of Education. I want to be a teacher. I want to teach our young future generation's to be proud of who they are as First Nations people, to fight back with words in a positive way and not with anger. I have a three year old daughter named Nevaeh, it is heaven spelled backwards. I have been married for five years to my husband named Tom Harvey. He is a Sergeant with 3PPCLI as a Sniper and has been over seas three times. I am the middle child of two older sisters and two younger brothers. I grew up in Saskatchewan and now have been living in Edmonton for the past six years.

I choose to write this piece about my late dad in a letter form. I tried to think of how could I tell it from a daughters view in a story, but could not put in all in a short story. I found it to be better as I would be writing this letter to him. It tells of all the things I wish I could have said and all the things that I have been carrying with me mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually. I lost him fourteen months ago and I still get very emotional thinking about him and his memory. Residential school plays a big part of my life because it literally stole my father from me. My late dad has taught me so much about who I am and has taught me a lot about forgiveness. He plays a huge role on my journey to healing. Ay Ay!