

Tan John
North Vancouver, BC
First Nations
17yrs.

My Soaring Eagle

I always wondered why my mom and dad broke up and mom said she would tell me when I was older. I asked her when I'd be old enough and she told me that I would know. I'm 17 and only know bits and pieces of what happened and I am scared to know the whole truth. I live with the partial truth everyday and I really don't want to know more because I love them both.

My Mosum died when he was 51. I saw a picture of him holding me tight trying to kiss my face as I was trying to pull away. You know those kisses that you want but you don't want because they tickle too much? That's what I remember. My Mosum was an alcohol and drug counselor for Native people. Mom said he would pray to the Creator every night for his people. At his funeral they played 'Everybody Hurts', by REM, and mom said this was the song Mosum used to get people to just open up and cry. My mom misses her parents and gets really quiet when that song comes on.

My Kokum drank a lot so I guess that makes her an alcoholic, but she had a lot of love to give everyone. I remember my Kokum letting me put make-up on her when I was four. Mom asked her why she let me do that (Kokum's face ended up pink and blue and red). She looked like a clown when I think back but when I was four she was beautiful because Kokum said I made her beautiful. My Kokum died at the age of 48. Mom told me Kokum went to residential school and was in a foster home until she ran away and married Mosum. In the beginning, Kokum and Mosum drank together, and had my mom and her two brothers. My Kokum and Mosum did not stay together because my Kokum couldn't quit drinking and my Mosum did. I'm glad mom had one sober parent so at least she had that to help her through life.

Mom hardly ever lived with her mom or dad but instead lived with Mosum's mom, which is my mom's Kokum and my Great-Kokum. My Great-Kokum was a fearless woman who was also very disciplined. Mom was doing chores by age six and babysitting newborns by age seven. Mom said they bathed once a week in a big steel tub that took a couple of hours to boil. She had to use the washroom outside that her Kokum built. Mom said that it was scary at night because it was far away from the house. I can't imagine not having my hot showers everyday and my lights in the bathroom. There's no way that I could have put make-up on in a dank, dark out-house in the middle of nowhere.

My mom is called either, First Nations, Indian, Aboriginal, and Native depending on who's speaking or how she's feeling. Other Native people can call each other Indian

and not be offended but watch the hurt pass her face when someone says it to her. She gets this look on her face like she has been fighting all her life and I think she has. The word “Indian” doesn’t bother me as much because it has become diluted just like our people, but the older generation still finds the term Indian to be very disrespectful.

My mom was with my dad for 9 years until they separated for the last time. It makes me sad but I understand my mom’s need to search for who she is since she never really knew who she was. My dad is Vietnamese and my mother also spoke Vietnamese. She told me that she used to pretend she wasn’t “Indian” by diving and hiding in another culture. My dad and grandma have different views and a different way to live than my mom does. In my mom’s house; she is loving, kind, compassionate, caring, busy, funny and she lets us make our own mistakes. She says that making our own mistakes is the best teacher because that is how she learned. I think First Nations people let their children make mistakes and stand by their children when they fall. My mom is very supportive and she tells me stuff from her past so I can learn from it today or in the future.

My mom is working on a book about her and my Kokum’s life. She says that one day, when she is no longer here, that at least we will have her story to have when we are searching for our own identities. I tell her not to talk like that because I never want to think about my mom leaving this earth, but she says she wants to be an eagle after she’s no longer here. It’s something I don’t want to think about but I guess she is just reacting to her parents dying young. She now collects eagle pictures and eagle statues because her real last name means soaring eagle. I see her trying hard to find out who she is and I am glad she is doing that because it’s her love that makes me who I am today.

Last year, we all sat and painted pictures of nature and the medicine wheel. She explained to us that the medicine wheel was the cycle of everything. It is the cycle of seasons, life, different people, animals and the four parts represent taking care of your self physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. Maybe one day I will finally understand just how important it is to First Nations people and to myself, being First Nations, but there are too many distractions. We live in the city and the medicine wheel does not seem as real when you are surrounded by competition. People around my age are not thinking about these kinds of things and neither am I really, but I figure I have some time. My mom only started to be proud of being Indian about 3 years ago but she had to get away from people who thought Indian people were alcoholics, drug addicts, and dirty people. Her last boyfriend used to use her race against her and now that he is gone she is a lot happier and her eagle pictures all over our house tell me that.

We went last year to my mom’s reserve and I was sort of surprised by everything I saw there and how sad it was. I understand why mom left. She wanted to get away from the sadness and the pain and the suffering and I’m glad she did but she had to leave her family behind to do it. I know she misses her family but I don’t think she could handle all the sadness. She says all the time that the effects of colonization still travel through the blood of every First Nations person and that we lose loved ones all the time because they have had everything our people ever knew, taken away. She has so much compassion for our people. She is going back to school so that she can use education to help our people.

She always tells me that education is very important because it can take you out of bad situations and make you understand more about the past and what happened to our people, but most of all it can help you with the future.

My Mom was sexually abused in a foster home when she was seven. I asked her if I could put this in here and she said sure and that it was not something she had to be ashamed of. I can't imagine someone hurting my mom that way, especially since I have a little brother, who is about the same age. I can't imagine anyone hurting my little brother that way because I don't think any of us could or would know how to deal with it. I wonder how she dealt with it sometimes but she is always traveling through life with this in her life. She says that when you don't know you are innocent and if you can't protect yourself it isn't your fault. She is a very strong woman, considering all the bad things that she had to go through. She says with each new generation that there are less hurtful things. I am glad she was strong enough to stand up and fight for us and protect us. I wish my Kokum and Mosum had done the same for her but she says they were not able to deal with it themselves so how could they help her. I always tell her every day I love her and she always tells me she loves us. She says we should never say goodbye but instead say see you later. I think it's because when we visited my Kokum for the last time in the hospital when I was nine we said goodbye to Kokum and when we came back from eating she had died. She was only 48. Mom says a lot of First Nations people die young. I just wish that mom would stop thinking that she will die young just because my grandparents did. However it's a fact she has to live with. When we are having a hard time with things we have no one to call, which is why mom says friends are very important. My mom is my best friend and she is also my hero. When I see her sad or struggling through hard times, I wish I could go back to the past and change things. The First thing I would do is get my Kokum out of the foster home she was in, where she was also sexually abused. Then I would take my mom out of that foster home and just hold them tight and tell them I loved them and to always believe they were worth the world and to never stop trying and then I would take them away from all that pain and try to take care of them. But I am only 17 and still have many years ahead of me and I am glad I have my mom there for me and my brothers. I don't know how she does it but she's my strong soaring eagle, the person I look up too.. I love her with all my heart and honestly really glad to have her. There's no one else I'd rather have than her.