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Métis First Nation
Age 14

Last Words

As I sat at the side of my great-grandfather's hospital bed I realized that this may be his last day on earth. At the age of fourteen I was not familiar with death and found it a little scary. I was comforted by my belief in the afterlife, but saddened that I would be losing him. At this time I looked at him for what felt like the first time.

He didn't look at all like the portrait of the proud young man atop his white steed in the painting my mother had hanging on the wall of our home. His dark leathery skin was filled with the lines and creases time had etched into his face. His once black hair was now completely white and his deep brown eyes that once twinkled looked so tired now. I thought of my own blonde hair, fair skin, and deep blue eyes and wondered how it was possible for me to be related to him. I had always known that I was Métis but I always felt like a fake because I didn't look native.

Grandfather used to love telling me stories about his great-grandmother Catherine of the Winds. She had lived in Fort Providence, N.W.T. in the 1800's. She was Cree and had married a Scot and together they had five children. She was said to have been perhaps one of the strongest women in those days. Not only did she do the work around the home, but she would trap and hunt like a man, and would travel by dog team or canoe. She acquired the name because while she would travel and hunt she did it with such great speed - just like the winds. Her and her husband acted as interpreters for the missionaries and are said to have been an important part of bringing Christianity to the native people. She had been a great woman. From what my grandfather had told me, I wished I could have met such a noble woman.

My great-grandfather had always been proud of his native heritage and spent his life farming, hunting and trapping much like his ancestors. He traded a horse for his wife and together they had eight children. He always felt like a blessed man but in his later

years he became saddened by the pain his own children would later endure because of discrimination. As they began going off to school one by one he was tortured by the realization that they were being scorned because of the colour of their skin and native ancestry. Society forced them to feel ashamed of who they were and in turn they suffered the guilt of trying to deny what their own father was so proud of.

It's hard to believe that the native people in Catherine's day did so much, with their kindness and hard work only to have future generations called "dirty, lazy drunken Indians." It would be hard to hear this all the time as a child and not eventually believe it. It is no wonder that many people turn to alcohol to forget the pain. Many are born into poverty causing a cycle of poverty throughout the generations because it is so tough to get out of. So many people are now ashamed of their native background because of this when they really should be embracing it. With strong native women such as Catherine who did so much, that should be what you think of when you hear of a native person, not what an uneducated few have determined us to be.

I jumped at the sound of my grandfather's voice after being in such a trance of thought. He was again speaking Cree so I could not understand a word. He squeezed my hand and repeated,

"Kakî-minahin cî nipy."

I finally realized he was asking for water and put the glass to his lips. He took a few small sips and managed a weak smile as he held onto my hand. Suddenly he began speaking English.

"I dreamed I was back on the farm. It was after harvest. The fiddles were playing and everyone was dancing. Your smile was so bright and vibrant. You jumped into my arms and I swung you around with your feet flying through the air."

Just as quickly as he had come back he was again gone. The confusion returned to his eyes and he was again rambling in Cree as he laid his head back and drifted off into sleep.

Sitting at his bedside reflecting on my grandfather's life and my own I knew that I had to find a way to honour him and my forefathers by becoming involved with changing society's perception of natives. As I pondered what I could do I heard voices coming from the hall. It was my grandfather's roommate's family yelling at the nurse,

“Can't we get my father moved to another room? I'm not comfortable with all those Indians coming and going day and night! My wife doesn't feel safe.....”

He stopped short as I came through the door. My face immediately turned a bright shade of red, and just as fast, so did his. A sick feeling overcame my body and I could feel myself begin to shake. As much as I wanted to scream and yell at this man, I couldn't for my lips began to tremble. I had never felt so many emotions rush over me at once. For a split second I felt shame but this quickly turned to outrage as I wanted to scream at this man what good people my family were. The tears that were being held back so tightly finally broke free. Throughout my school years, I had been told and taught about discrimination, but never really knew the true meaning until this very moment. The impact had hit me as hard as a baseball bat, and at that moment I wished it could have been. I knew I could eventually recover from the blow of the baseball bat, but the words would stick with me forever. I would never forget the look of shame on that man's face as I stood there devastated and the nurse was glaring back at him over the tops of her glasses.

I felt the urge to run and hide, but I could not move. As I stood in the doorway, I looked towards my grandfather through my tears and thought I saw the woman I had heard so much about, Catherine of the Winds sitting at his bedside holding his hand. I immediately rubbed my eyes to see only my grandfather. I returned to his side, in place of



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where I thought I had seen Catherine. My grandfather, fading in and out of the spirit world and ours, grabbed my hand, and looked me directly in the eyes. I never knew that such a firm grip could come from such a weak man. He gestured me with his other hand to come in closer. Through great difficulty, he finally managed to speak. It had been so soft, so quiet, and so quaint. I could barely hear his voice.

“We share the same blood, so you can’t be a fake. You’ll know what has to be done when your time comes. When you feel the wind, know that you are not alone.”

At that moment the rest of my extended family returned from lunch. I was overcome with emotion knowing the pain and struggle they endured through their lives all because of our native ancestry. I knew I needed some air, so I went outside for a walk. It was a beautiful day and the sun was shining. The air was thick with humidity and a breeze would have been welcomed. I pondered my great-grandfather’s words and realized he was right, I wasn’t a fake, I was Métis. My heart swelled with pride and as I looked up at the sky, a warm breeze enveloped me. At that moment I knew grandfather had passed but he would always be in my heart.