

I didn't grow up on reserve. My fully Native mom, being the only girl my grandmother gave birth to, moved away from the Malahat reserve when she married my quarter Native dad because he got a job in the Okanagan. Even though I'm only a quarter European, I'm a bit pale for a Native, and that never really occurred to me until very recently. I knew I didn't pass as White, but I was lighter than most Natives I've known, who are brown with black hair. Do I still get to be Native with lighter skin? Or do I not belong, even though my grandpa went to residential school?

Regardless of my lighter skin, I met someone who was curious. She came up and asked me in the student lounge, "Aren't you an Indian?"

I looked up from my textbook at the girl, and said, "Yeah...?" "She could tell?"

She'd paused for a moment, before saying, "What kind?"

And I said, "I don't know. If I scalped you, would that answer your question?"

I laughed at her reaction. Her jaw dropped as she inched away.

"I'm kidding. Did you know White people used to get paid for scalping Natives? So you should be asking that the next time someone says to you, 'Hey, are you a real White person?'"

"U-um," she stammered. "I didn't know that."

Amused by her fluster, I laughed again. "Sorry."

She was appalled. "Why are you laughing?"

I've been conflicted about this myself, but... "I believe that First Nations can bounce back from what happened in the past.... That we should look at the bright side." I extended a hand. "My name's Orion, by the way."

I'm still not sure if I had a right to say that. But if she could tell I was Native, maybe I did?

She eagerly shook my hand. "Isabelle."

Not growing up on reserve did take away a lot from me. Getting to know my family for one thing. I always feel like a stranger whenever I go back to visit. Almost like an outsider, which I guess I am. I'm not a pow-wow dancer, I don't speak hul'q'umi'num', I don't do sweat lodge. It's not because I don't want to do those things--I want to learn my ancestral language more than anything--but I don't really have access to them here in Salmon Arm.

Salmon Arm is pretty White; the KKK even used to own land here. That's why this town used to be called one of British Columbia's most racist towns. People here have told me, *I don't really see you as Native*, like it was good thing. I feel like it's because "Native" is associated with alcoholism or addiction (both of which are diseases). Aside from that, personally, I've never experienced overt, hateful racism. I myself didn't know racism was a huge thing in Canada, because Canadians are seen as nice. It's like a smoke screen to what really does on up here in the "true north." Missing and murdered women, terrible living conditions on reserves, increased victimization, high rates of suicide; and I used to think these things were normal, before I learned the truth. Indigenous people continue to go missing and be murdered, most of which the media looks passed to pay attention to a missing White man or an abused dog.

Says a lot about Canadians, eh?

And then when they say they aren't racist, what they're saying actually *is racist*. Some Whites boast about not seeing race, seeing "only humans," but in doing so they're erasing a big part of who we are. Our people fought against erasure in the past, so why continue what was a huge factor in indigenous genocide?

I don't know. Maybe I take it too seriously.

Isabelle turned out to be pretty nice. The reason why she was asking was because she was curious about Native culture. We became friends, and I learned that she is a quarter Cherokee; that's why she was curious when we first met. I've become like an outlet of knowledge for her. I don't know everything, and she knows that, but any questions she has, I answer the best I can.

"Why *don't* many people know about First Nations?" she asks me one day, when we're sharing a table in a local coffee shop.

"They don't want to admit their sins, I guess," I respond. "When I was in grade seven, we were learning all about how terrible the Germans were during World War Two, how much the Jews suffered." I pause. "And did you know Canada enforced multiculturalism only after the Holocaust? That happened when Indians were still getting the Indian beaten out of them in residential schools, on North American soil."

She shakes her head. "That's such BS. I thought Canadians were supposed to be nice."

"Right?" I reply. "Canadians have always bragged about their nice and friendliness, they have the rest of the world fooled into thinking they're better."

"You don't think of yourself as Canadian," she guesses.

"We never wanted to be Canadian, so no."

Isabelle nods. "I get it."

"Natives get cups of coffee and rocks thrown at them just for being who they are," I say. "I've lost many family members from suicide, alcoholism. One was murdered."

Her face drains, as she gapes at me. "Orion, I'm so sorry."

"She was my cousin," I go on.

"Oh my god."

Not being able to handle the look of pity I've seen too many times before, I look down. "It was two years ago. I didn't really know her.

"She was missing for three... four weeks? Um, they found her in a lake, and she was in there so long that the funeral had to be closed-casket."

At the time I felt stupid, when I was at the funeral, because I cried. I cried when there were people who actually knew her who were saying strong. I was crying, and boys aren't supposed to cry. Did I have a right?

"I was the one holding her sister's, Ebony's, arm as the casket was being taken to the cemetery. I was the one holding a box of tissues for Ebony as the casket was being lowered into the ground. To that point, I still couldn't believe it. I never got to know Emily, but now I never will."

Isabelle seems to be unsure of how to react. "I'm so sorry," she says again.

I still don't look up at her, so I stare at the table. "It was a shock. I didn't know this happens to countless other families in Canada. Indigenous families, especially, because our families don't get taken seriously. The reason being 'they're probably drug addicts or prostitutes.'"

"What's wrong with prostitutes?" I can hear the frown on her face.

Shaking my head, I shrug. "Your guess is as good as mine."

A silence follows. Have I said too much?

Hesitantly, I continue, "Her... dad was my late uncle. I never knew him either, he committed suicide before I was born."

I try to make eye contact but she's not looking at me. At first I thought I thought I making her uncomfortable, but when I see her, she looks depressed. "It's so sad..." she says, meeting my eyes. "What Natives go through? I wish there was something I could do."

I stay quiet for a moment. Like I said, I've always been shy; I've never told that to anyone.

"You have the blood too," I say encouragingly. "It's never too late to learn."

"But I'm only a quarter."

"It doesn't matter. Being Native isn't some exclusive club or anything."

"Really?" Her eyes spark with hope

"Yeah. I had a friend who was non-status Native, but she still danced fancy shawl. She was great."

If I don't experience hate based on skin colour, do I still have a right to be optimistic?

As the grandson of a residential school survivor, as the cousin of a stolen sister, I think I do.

Because somehow, over time, she ends up becoming more of a reason for me to hold on to the culture. I have the ability to educate people, especially people like her, who don't know where to start feeling connected. I've become her pathway to that connection, and she's joined me on a pathway to resilience; a pathway to belonging.