

Starleigh Grass
Tsilhqotin First Nation
Age 26

Aunty Eileen's Bedtime Stories

The land here is so hot it radiates the sun's rays back to you even after dark. If you've ever been here you'd know. In the summer the dry sun is so bright that it overpowers the colours around you and fades them like construction paper taped to a school room window for too long. Dry, dusty landforms frame the horizon. If you want to watch erosion in motion drive up into the hills during a rainstorm and watch the clay banks melt. Downtown you can walk out onto a pier and see where the North Thompson and South Thompson Rivers meet. The pier doesn't serve any function except to let people look at the junction, so you might as well do it if you're here so that it doesn't sit there uselessly protruding into the water. This strange land is five hours south east of my home territory. I live here for now, but my heart will always be elsewhere.

Right now I am eating sunflower seeds in my car in the parking lot outside of the university in Kamloops, BC. I just might die of heatstroke by two o'clock. At two o'clock I have an interview before a panel of three people who will decide whether or not I am right for the social work program. The interview is a full hour. I could very well die of anxiety before I die of exposure.

When I finished high school I wanted to be a writer. I'm a good listener, so I know all the good stories. I bumbled around in the world for awhile before going back to school when I was twenty-six to do some upgrading then started at Thompson Rivers University in the Bachelor of Arts Program. I took a lot of English classes in my first year so I could get into the second year creative writing course. By the time I finished the creative writing course I knew that no one could really understand our stories unless they had gone looking for no-aye berries at the foot of the Snow Mountains or slid their dip net into the turbulent Fraser River while standing on a rickety hand built dock. You can't listen to a story about someone who froze to death on the plateau unless you've been stuck on a logging road in January while the sun sets far too fast for comfort. Unless

you've been to the bottom of Bull Canyon you don't understand the significance of flying across it. In second year I also took an Aboriginal Studies course. While reading mountains of studies about how likely it was that I would die younger and earn less than my non-Aboriginal counterparts I realized that the pride and joy held in those stories were the only things standing between me and despair. Some stories are not for everyone. Some stories are for my children and my grandchildren and my great grandchildren and all the proud Tsilhqot'ins who will live and die from now until the end of time.

Instead of being a writer I applied to the school of social work. I want to work in child protection. I know that the system is broken, I know it's cruel, and I know every day the system lets a child down. Yet I think that maybe if a compassionate person goes into the system they can make it a tiny bit less cruel. Maybe I can show some care, give some love, and save even one child from hopelessness.

The alarm on my phone is going off. It is one-fifty. Time to go in. I check my appearance in the rear view mirror. My face is all sweaty, which I knew it would be, which is why I pinned my bangs back and didn't wear any eye makeup. I look like my mom today.

The waiting room is literally cold and sterile. The air conditioning must be on full blast and I decide to stand instead of sitting on the chairs which look and smell like someone just sprayed them with disinfectant and forgot to fully wipe it off. At precisely two o'clock a lady comes out of a conference room and beckons me in.

The panel does not look very threatening. On the left sits a thin man in a tweed suit and polka dot bow tie with steel rimmed glasses introduces himself as the dean. If you put him in a firefighter's outfit he would still look like an academic so his choice of clothing and accessories is ridiculous. The man is a walking hyperbole and I immediately like him because of it. A woman with blonde hair wearing a cheap suit introduces herself as a Ministry of Children and Families social worker. Finally, a woman with short grey hair wearing jeans and a tank top introduces herself as a woman's center volunteer who represents the interests of the community in this interview. They offer me coffee, water,

and stale apple strudel. I take a little of everything and comment on how tasty the apple filling is because that is the traditional way to accept hospitality.

We go over my educational background, volunteer experiences, and transcripts. We go over my admissions essay sentence by sentence. Halfway through my admissions essay they are talking among each other about my three month stint at a halfway house as graveyard shift supervisor, and seeing that they are distracted I steal a glance at my watch. Two thirty-five? I can feel sweat drenching my freshly ironed shirt and my heart is beating so hard that I can hardly hear what they're saying. I fix myself another coffee and then stare at it knowing that if I drink it I will have to pee, and if I have to pee I will have to hold it in because I will be too afraid to ask to go to the bathroom in the middle of my interview. I notice a lump of unmelted coffee whitener in the coffee so I take the brown plastic stir stick and slowly try to break it up. In the back of my head I wonder if my admissions essay is sincere enough.

“So,” the academic is talking to me. I immediately abandon the glob in my Styrofoam cup and give him my undivided attention, “why do you want to work in child protection?”

I mull over the question for a minute. I wonder what I wrote in my admissions essay. My nerves have shut down my brain and I can't remember the prepared answer I had ready for this question.

“Well,” I sit up straighter, “you know when children first tell someone about abuse?”

“You mean a disclosure?” the social worker asks.

“Yes, a disclosure,” I say, “I think I would be good at that.”

The community member raises her perfectly plucked eyebrow in a question mark. The eyebrow leads me to tell a story I'd never told before.

When I was fifteen my mom's younger sister moved into the same apartments in Kamloops that we lived in. She was only nine years older than me so sometimes it felt like she was more of a sister than an aunt. She asked me to baby sit her toddlers a couple times a month while she went out on the town. When she was going out she would wear blue eye shadow and curl her hair and I thought she was the prettiest aunty I had, even prettier than my uncle's delicate eighteen year old girlfriend who had fluffy blonde hair and tiny bones. After she left I would lie on the couch, half asleep, waiting for her to come home. After the bars closed she would come home with a pack of partiers and I would run back and forth from the kitchen getting beer or cooking breakfast or emptying ashtrays for them. Waylon Jennings and loud laughter would fill my ears till about four when people started going home or nodding off. Then Aunty Eileen would turn her attention to me.

"Come sit beside me," she would say, "You're so pretty. I used to be pretty like you."

"You're the prettiest aunty I have." I would tell her. Then she would cry. I would hold her hand while she cried.

Over the course of two years she told me that a nun stole the necklace her dad's boss gave her. That nun used to beat her up because she was too proud. A girl died in the bed next to her one night and no one knew why. One year they put her in the infirmary even though she wasn't sick. Every morning she'd take a pill, then she would go back to sleep. Sometimes she'd wake up and someone would be standing over her bed taking notes or drawing blood from her arm. In the spring of that year she had a seizure, and after she had her seizure she was sent back to the dorm and they never sent her to the infirmary again.

It wasn't what she said, it was the way she said it. Every word came out slowly like a gentle prayer for a lost child. Thirty words could take thirty minutes to tell. She'd wring her hands on her lap and cry silently.



The last time I babysat for her I knew what was coming when she started crying.

“One time my dad sent me some oatmeal cookies and they stole them. They said he gave the cookies to them because he knew I was a proud child and proud children go to hell. I believed them because I didn’t know any better.” She hugged me and asked me never to tell my grandma because my grandma would get upset if she knew. I hugged her back and waited for her to fall asleep so I could go home.

At home I would think about her stories. She carried so much shame and guilt because of all the things the nuns said to her. No one talked about Residential Schools back then. Everyone walked around in the lonely prison of their mind which was silent save the echoes of nuns’ voices. Everyone thought that if they just remained silent long enough it would go away. People who went to school didn’t want to hear about it because it hurt too much. Non-Aboriginal people didn’t want to hear it then and don’t want to hear it now because it makes them feel like they did something wrong. My aunty did everything she could to forget. She told me that she knew she shouldn’t talk about it but she couldn’t help it.

I wish that I could have told her that it wasn’t her fault. She didn’t deserve that. She wasn’t a bad person for being pretty or proud. I wish I could have told her that other people were feeling the same things because they’d been through the same things as her so she wasn’t nearly as alone as she felt. I wouldn’t have told her that everything will be all right, because no one can guarantee that. I’ll never be able to tell her those things because she went over the yellow line and hit a logging truck head on when she was twenty-six. Some people say it wasn’t an accident. I wish I could have done things differently, and maybe if I work in child protection I will have the chance to finally say those things.



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I stare out the window and watch birds fly into the holes in the clay banks to hide from the afternoon sun. I have used up the last of my time with these people and now it is time to go.

Time to go home and hug my children. Time to go see my mother and let her hug my children. Time to go hug my mother and tell her that I love her. The room is silent. Even the air conditioner has stopped to reflect for a minute. The panel looks sad. I feel bad for making them sad.

“I want to believe that the only good future is a future where children are treated with love and respect. I want the opportunity to treat children with the love and respect they deserve. Thank you for your time.” I shake their hands and they say things I don’t hear. I pull out of the parking lot as fast as I can. For now it doesn’t matter whether or not I did well in my interview because right now I just want to go home and see that my children are safe and happy.