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Age 27

### **Homecoming**

She looked around at the dreary apartment, scanning and never focusing. No longer would this place, this empty space, be her home. She still had no idea how she felt about it. For years she lived in one hole after another. From town to city, city back to town. They were all the same when it came down to it. Not her home. Not her home at all in fact. Never was, never would be again.

She'd lived a life of solitary confinement since she married as a young woman barely out of her teens. He'd taken her away immediately with promises of a better life. Ripped from the bosom of her mama, the bosom of her community. In exchange she gave up her status and her rights as an Anishnaabe Kwe.

Course that didn't seem quite so important at the time. There were no jobs on the reserve anyway. The best she could've hoped for was to marry one of her distant cousins and raise five or six kids like her mama and aunties had. Course maybe if she had they coulda been bootleggers and it wouldna been so tight for money. Looking back on it, at least she would've had her family and those friends from childhood that didn't marry the white man and lose their band memberships.

There would've been potluck feasts and baseball tournaments and dances and pow wows to look forward too. But nope. She thought she was getting the better deal back then. And for a while it really did look like she was gonna have the life her marriage offered her promise of.

She daydreamed she'd go to beauty school once they moved into to the city. And she'd keep a neat and tidy house the way her mother had taught her and cook wonderful meals that made their house smell like a home. But this new home of hers was hours away from the home she knew as a child and a teenager. And the house wasn't ever much

more than a dingy little apartment. No, it certainly was not the home where her legs grew long and tanned the summer she turned fourteen. Where she picked crayfish and leeches to sell to the men that fished on her lake in the summer time, and where she could pick blueberries all day long without having to move from her spot.

Idyllic memories, she shakes her head. How could she go back to the place she left for opportunity that never did knock after she married? Would they welcome her just because she was having her status reinstated? Was she still one of them despite the years and distance that separated them? The government told her she was no longer an Indian when she took her husband's name. But she never felt any different on the inside. And now that the government was telling her that once again she was an Indian, how was she supposed to pick up where she left off?

Her cousin had told her that there were more jobs on the rez and that more and more people were sobering up, even offering her a place to stay while she waited for band housing. She knew that she could return home to her mothers' house if she wanted to but she wasn't sure if she was ready. Besides her cousin was assistant band manager and she might be able to help make her transition back to the reserve a little bit easier.

She'd been thinking about it and she wished she'd visited more often and tried a little harder to stay in touch with the folks back home. Somehow he always managed to convince her that her family wasn't missing her, that he needed her more, that her friendships and her community were her past. He was her future. Besides, she wasn't an Indian anymore anyway.

It didn't matter to him that he never delivered on the promises he'd made to keep her. He never kept work longer than six months. And someone was always comin' lookin' for him, claiming that he owed them money. Before she knew it they were moving again, first to another part of the city, then to a new city altogether. And the drinkin' always started at the first of the month and carried on until he was broke. Then

he'd find another job and promise things would be different this time. They never were any different though.

Well this time she'd had enough. She didn't want to be this man's wife anymore than she wanted to live in this welfare town, anonymous and depressed. They'd never lived anywhere long enough for her to make a friend or get a job of her own and her dream of beauty school had faded long ago.

But now she was makin' some changes. She was going home, once and for all, that was all there was to it. She didn't love the man anymore anyways. And she longed to feel like she fit in somewhere. She wanted safety and security, and a life filled with friends and family. A chance to start over. She looked forward to seeing her mama and her aunties, her cousins and their children. She was excited to pick up her new status card at the band administration office. She was gonna be a card carrying Indian for the first time in so many years! She could believe how much the thought excited her.

She glanced at her watch. She'd better get going if she was gonna catch that bus. She flung her purse over her shoulder and swung her coat over her arm. This was it. Her day of reckoning had come and she was going home.

She bought a one way ticket, a pack of smokes, and a diet Coke then chose her seat carefully when she got on the bus. Only a window seat would do. Her emotional state was turmoil and she had more than a few moments of doubt, but once the bus pulled out and got on the highway she knew there was no turning back. "Creator, please, help me to know I'm doing the right thing". She prayed silently to herself. She leaned her head on the glass and watched the shoulder of the road go blurring by.

Day turned into night and then back into morning. She woke every time the bus pulled into some small town to drop someone off. The milk run they called it. Took almost twice as long as by car to get to where you're goin'.

Once in a while she got off at one of those stops to have a few puffs of a cigarette and to try and imagine her future, which she couldn't. There were only a handful of passengers remaining on the bus by the time the bus finally reached her stop. Her stop was the Post Office and General Store at the end of a dirt road on the side of a secondary highway in the middle of not much. That dirt road was the home stretch. The final seventeen kilometers between her and her decided destiny. Her reserve.

The bus pulled into the ol' Post Office on the side opposite where she was sitting. She didn't see the green station wagon or the people who had come to meet her. She gathered up her few belongings and wondered if the pay phone outside the post office was working so that she could call her cousin to come and pick her up. The oddest feelings came over her when she stepped off the bus that had been the catalyst between her recent past and near future.

The sun hit her face and feelings of nervous joy and apprehension flooded her senses.

She rounded the front of that bus and met the faces from her home waiting for her. She was dumbfounded. There waiting for her was her mama and her cousin and even her brother and his wife. There was even an ol' Rez dog waiting in the car. There was laughter and teasing and immediately her heart felt light and happy. They took her bags and pulled her in and hugged her and welcomed her home with all the love and happiness she never did dare allow herself to hope for. They piled her in the car and told her stories as if she'd only gone into town and back, not the years she'd been away. As they drove up that winding dirt road they told her about the bingo and the potluck supper they were gonna take her to and how good the blueberries had been this year. She smiled and laughed and for the first time she knew that it never mattered to them if she had a status card and a band number, that they hadn't changed, she had. She also realized that if this was a homecoming then she sure was glad to finally be coming home.