

I light the sage and set down the abalone shell on my bundle, which lays on a small oak table in the corner. I give a couple moments for the smoke to stream up and watch as it slowly swirls and expands throughout the small sunlight room. I think of how both of these objects were once alive. The iridescent shell was once the home for a sea snail, and the dried sage had grown in the earth from a small seed. Through the smoke, I can see my degree in social work hanging on the wall and I fixate on my last name. *Meawasige*, it was my mothers name and it is Anishinaabemowin for rising sun.

I look at Creedance who is sitting across from me, but of course, he is looking down at his lap. He has been my client for a few months now and was referred here by his guidance counsellor at the Native high school a couple blocks away. I look at his soft smooth face, had he not been so tall, he could easily be mistaken for much younger than a 10th grader. I did not think he would return after his first session; he is an extremely shy teenager whose eyes dart away as soon as I make eye contact and he rarely has anything to say. Many of his responses to my questions aren't even verbal; shrugs, headshakes and the unconscious nervous fidgeting of his fingers.

Just like the sea snail with the abalone shell, Creedance has a tough barrier around him for protection. Not all humans wear this armour, Creedance has been hurt, and he feels safer barricading himself from everyone. It is only when people feel vulnerable that they develop these defense mechanisms. Although metaphorical, Creedances shell is visible to anyone. His long hair swoops down his forehead landing on his eyelashes and his cloak of hair is usually kept down by the hood of the oversized sweaters he wears. His spine is a curious shape with his neck limp and shoulders slouched forward. With his eye gaze perpetually down, he becomes invisible, even if only in his own mind, and he can easier navigate through life and the hectic city he lives in, Toronto.

I am not supposed to, but I feel genuinely sorry for Creedance. It hurts my heart to look at him and know all that he has gone through...or at least what I know he has been through, from what he has told me. I know I should not spend so much time fixating on him but he reminds me of a boy I used to know, Johnathan. Johnathan had also been dragged through life by unfortunate events until he too was left broken and defeated. Johnathan and Creedance like many others, were not born melancholic, they were worn down, slowly by outside influences, until they became small and sad.

Johnathan grew up on the beautiful shores of Lake Huron, living in a modest wood home in Wikwemikong First Nation. His big family of eight, tightly packed into the old one-story two room house, but he had kilometres of forest to call a backyard and spent most days outdoors playing with his siblings. This way of living abruptly ended when he was 5 years old, when he and his siblings went into the custody of children's protection services. Being a child of that age, Johnathan was left confused and did not know why his family was being separated; did his parents not want them? Was it something he had done? Why didn't his mom and dad care enough to come get him? He was told he was going to live with a new family.

Johnathan had spent time with two families. The first family, the Hopkin's, lived in a big house in a small town an hour northwest from his reserve. They had shiny appliances in their house he had never seen and a massive freezer in the basement that was full of food. The Hopkin's lived in abundance and excess. Each of their three children had their own rooms. It was Johnathan's first time having his own room and he spent many nights looking through the window into the dark sky and thinking of his family. The three

pale skin, light haired children didn't talk much to him or ask him to play with them. When Johnathan started school he could not help but notice that there was no other person that looked like him, neither student nor teacher. Johnathan was picked on mercilessly and called names like 'dirty Indian'. He looked at his brown skin and realised it did resemble the color of dirt and remembers thinking that he *was* dirty. He took long showers and tried to rub his skin free of its ugly color with soap but it remained no matter how hard he scrubbed. He watched as his pale family lather on strange lotion before going outside in the summers, or else they burn, and he thought that this might be what keeps their skin from darkening. He asked his foster mom one day if he could also put on the lotion but he was told that his skin did not need it. In the seclusion of the bathroom, he snuck the bottle from the medicine cabinet and smeared the white strong-smelling goop onto his skin. He panicked when the white lotion visibly sat on his skin but after working it in for a couple moments, it eventually absorbed in. He tried this a dozen times but it had no effect and he was left disappointed. The Hopkin's were nice people but they treated Johnathan like a second-class child and had none of the affections and love for him that they had even for the family dog. That dog though, became Johnathan's best friend. At first, he thought it was strange that the Hopkin's let their shih tzu in the house and on the furniture. On the rez, people had dogs but they roamed around outside without collars and spent time with other dogs, not with humans. Despite being separate creatures of this world, this dog and Johnathan bonded and were often inseparable. Johnathan remembers looking into the shiny black eyes of the dog and thinking that it was the only being who loved him in this entire world.

Then child protective services was back and Johnathan was taken against his will again. It was not the best living with the Hopkin's but he had his own room, his stomach was always full, and there was a dog that loved him. He thought it was his fault, the way he looked perhaps...or maybe if he had gotten better grades the Hopkin's would have thought him a worthy family member. It didn't matter. They were giving him up just as his parents had and things were uncertain again.

His next family, the Bernett's, were much different than the Hopkin's. They lived in a small house in the outskirts of Sault Ste. Marie and packed it with misfit foster children from child services. The Bernett parents stopped being able to conceive after their first born and decided to foster and adopt children, they saw as unwanted, to fulfil their dream of having a big family. After dozens of children had gone through their house, they kept seven to adopt and this created the Bernett family. Mrs. Bernett's heart swelled to love all of her children, biological or not, but it was still not enough to fill all the emptiness created inside Johnathan. It was Mr. Bernett that Johnathan sought affection from. Mr. Bernett was a hard working man, who was a dutiful provider, quick witted and had a sharp temper. Mrs. Bernett's love came overflowing and free, in the act of a hug, or in the attentive manner in which she looked after her children. However, Mr. Bernett never showed much tenderness toward his children. This was not from lack of caring, but rather through discipline and tough love that he was shown growing up. He was to pass this on to his children to help develop them into the strong independent adults that they needed to be to survive in this world. He wanted his boys to be sturdy and stoic, so that is what Johnathan strived for. He shoved all of his hurt deep down inside of him and became unflinching in the face of adversity. The only way to capture his fosters dad's attention was to impress him. Mr. Bernett had been a star athlete in his teens and nowadays he loved to gloat to his friends over his children's accomplishments, especially athletic talents. Johnathan was not the tallest, biggest, or faster in his grade but he worked tirelessly to be the best in every sport he played. The moments of making his foster dad proud were fleeting, few and far between. Mr. Bernett never referred to Johnathan as his son, only ever as his foster

son, even after the adoption papers were signed. These soul-crushing moments kept Johnathan from falling into the fantasy and believing that he had a real family. He was living with many people, but he was alone, he was always meant to be alone.

The year that Johnathan turned 18 he moved to the big city of Toronto, the place of opportunities, to find his own way through this world. At the friendship centre, he began to learn about Indigenous people, history and culture. He was told that he was not given up by his parents, he was taken. It is called the 60's scoop but for many decades, Native children were forcibly taken from their families. He finally let way to the enormous curiosity inside of him and requested his child aid documents to locate his biological family. He learned his siblings had all been separated from each other, his oldest brother died in a drunk driving accident also killing his girlfriend, a sister died of an illness in her teens, and his parents had both gone to residential school, which started the slow withering decay of them, their spirits dying then their bodies following. With all of this new information, Johnathan felt the acute pain of sorrow that he thought he was no longer capable of feeling. His shell shattered under the enormous pressure and he was left raw and exposed. He turned to alcohol to keep himself numb. It took a vision, a couple months into his foggy drug fuelled, semi-conscious state, that pulled him out of the abyss. He dreamed he saw his deceased brother, of course, he had never seen his brother as an adult but he knew it was him. He saw his brother walking down a street and at his side was a radiant woman whose arms clutched a tiny bundle against her chest. It was the family his brother was to have, had he not given into darkness and poisonous alcohol.

On that day, Johnathan forged a new path. He would not let his circumstances dictate his life anymore. It took all of his willpower and strength to fight against the forces that wanted to keep him down. He stayed sober and enrolled in school. It was a moment that changed his life, one moment. He thought that everyone suffering should have their own chance to create a new path for themselves. He wanted his own existence to be an instrument to help others find The Way of a Good Life (*Mino-Bimaadiziwin*). He found his calling in social work and began his career supporting and empowering Indigenous youth.

Johnathan looks over at Creedance's tired face in the tilted afternoon sunlight and takes a deep breath. Creedance reminds Johnathan of himself, the person he used to be, the young man who went through life only knowing heartache and not knowing where he belongs. It breaks Johnathan's heart to think of the immeasurable pain that Creedance carries around, for he too used to carry such a sadness. Still, Johnathan knows there is hope, there is always hope for a better future. After all, Creedance is here, getting help and it only takes one moment, one small action, for someone to begin their healing journey.