

WHOLE

On my rez, we always gather for large dinners, where the huge table is so cramped that the family spills onto the couches and floor as the TV blares. I always end up there with my mom, watching her ask about people I don't know.

Some of my aunts ask me about school.

It's there with them, and my mom, that it feels like home.

Except—

Except.

I was young. Six, maybe. "Go play with your cousins," my mom tells me, eager to chat with her aunties. Eager for me to fit in, too. With my family.

I, of course, run downstairs after my cousins. What mom says is law.

But I am a shy little thing, prone to tears.

I cried twice that day.

My cousins didn't see the native blood—their blood—flowing red through my veins. They did not see my whole; they saw my half. A girl, born off-reserve with too shiny shoes.

The one thing I remember is that I stubbed my toe on a plastic basketball hoop kicking them away from me. I was six, and I had just started karate, and they decided to try to beat me up because I wasn't born native enough.

They learned about my native blood that day.

I learned about my native spirit.

I am a bit older, and I jam out to a Tribe Called Red, loving the way the beat pulses in my ribcage, in my soul. I think maybe, that it reminds me of the people behind me who listened to the same drumbeats in a different time. I'm in elementary school at the time, and many kids ask what I listen to.

Each time, when I play it for them, I am always wary of the judgement in their eyes.

They hear screaming; senseless and abhorrent.

They never hear the battle cry in the words. They never hear the survivors, and the resistance in the pound of the drums.

I do.

When I was nine, my lovely little cousin was born to my mother's brother. She too, much like me, had a shock of brown hair almost immediately after her entrance into this world. She too, much like me, was half-native, half-white.

I used to envy her.

I used to hate myself too, because she fit so seamlessly into a culture that I didn't.

How can you envy an innocent little baby girl, because your papa gave her a traditional name before she was even born?

How can you envy a sweet baby girl with a brilliant little mind and knack for sipping juice boxes because your mother refused to allow you a traditional name years after you were born?

I don't know how, but I did.
No matter that I loved her.

My mom used to tell me many stories. At night, she would read to me about Turtle Island, and I'd listen with wide eyes. But my favourite story is one she told me in casual passing.

Whenever it thunders loud enough to shake my bones, my mom tells me how our ancestors are playing lacrosse. "Someone just got slammed hard," she always says with a twinkle in her eyes. I like that idea, that those who have moved on still gather to have fun.

Sometimes I wish for thunderstorms, because that is when I can feel my ancestors the closest, when I can reach out and feel the sweat and tears of them raining against my skin. They calm me enough that I can swathe myself in blankets and sit next to my mom, listening to the rain and thunder and lightning, and remember what it is like to be human.

I am fifteen, and I have learnt to love myself a little better. It's grade nine Social Studies class, and the teacher is quietly explaining about Residential Schools. I am fine through it, even though a weight starts to settle in my shoulders. The other kids are definitely fine through it, more inclined to topics like gossip, and sports, and who liked their Instagram post and who didn't.

My teacher puts on a video—an old propaganda video for Residential Schools.

I am fine through it, though the weight starts to settle a little angrily in my throat. The other kids are definitely fine through it, more inclined to topics like gossip, and sports, and who liked their Instagram post and who didn't.

My teacher plays one last video.

This one is different, because it has faces of people with the same dark hair as mine. Sad faces. Wrinkled faces with set mouths. Young women and men. *My grandma went to a Residential School*, they say. Horror does not begin to cover it. They recant stories. I am not fine through it. The weight has settled into the pit of my stomach, and I am crying. Softly, so softly, because the other kids are definitely fine through it, more inclined to topics like gossip, and sports, and who liked their Instagram post and who didn't.

And I am crying and crying because I can feel that shared, heavy and old sadness that spans generations in my heart. I can feel the pain of it, and I am alone.

But despite of all this, here is what I will tell you.

At sixteen, I have learnt to fight with my fists and body until I have become a wolf in a woman's skin. Ten years of training means no more fear from mean cousins, nor anyone else. And one day, I will teach other native women how to bare their fangs too. I will put feathers on our t-shirts and remind them that they are descended from warriors.

I listen to a Tribe Called Red before I compete in Martial Arts now. I don't care if others don't like it, because I do. The drum is an echo of my heart and warrior spirit, and I will remind them of that spirit when I win and my arm is raised high and loudly, like a battle cry.

I love my baby cousin with all my heart. I was in a dark place when I could not love her with every inch of myself. I FaceTime her when I can, and smile at the girl she is becoming.

I want to tell you that we are all descended from warriors. I still wish and dream with eagles when they fly overhead, and like my hair best when it is braided. It does not matter if someone tells me I am not a whole, but only a half. You are white? Yes. You are Native? Yes.

My blood will always ring true, so don't you dare tell the wolf that I am, that it does not.

Konoronkwa, my mom tells me.

It is one of the most beautiful words, painted in culture.

I love you too.

I am not half-white, or half-Native.

I am whole.