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Native at Heart

By: Holly LaFrance

It wasn't enough that they had forced us into schools where our cultural beliefs meant nothing, taken away our language, our faith, our hope; now, they were taking away the one and only thing that we had left, the one thing that we thought would be ours forever – our natural-born right to our native status.

“But Mama, it's not fair!” I protested. “Why must they continue to destroy our people? They've already taken away everything else, are they not yet satisfied?”

“I know, baby, I know,” my mother replied. Her dark brown eyes, so old, so wise, were full with concern and worry. She looked at me and sighed, her whole body seemed to sink, as if with every sigh, a slight weight was added to her shoulders.

“I just don't know what to do,” I said, as I sunk down beside my mother onto the old, decaying couch. Its green fabric was tattered, exposing its once soft foam inside. She put her arm around me, and I placed my head on her shoulder, losing myself in her scent. She smelled of meat, bannock, and leaves in the fall; it brought me back to my childhood – to those carefree days when my only concerns were scraped knees, and getting in by dark. She had her own unique scent, my mother, it was hers, her own, and no one could take it away from her.

“I wish everything was like that,” I whispered softly to myself.

“What was that Aylen?” my mother asked me, her focus shifting from the century old birch tree, swaying in the warm summer breeze outside our front window, back to the humming sound of the washing machine and again to my head on her shoulder.

“Nothing, Mama,” I said, lifting my head. “I love Daniel more than anything, but I just can't bring myself to do something that will cause me to lose my status. And it seems no matter what my decision is, I'm going to lose something that I love. It's just not fair!”

“Look at me,” she said, taking my head in her gentle, aging hands, “I know that right now, your whole world is being turned upside down, but you just need to have faith Aylen.”

“Faith in what Mama?” I asked, my voice beginning to rise. “There is nothing left to have faith in! They've taken *everything* away from us! As if marrying a non-



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status citizen is so threatening to them! Now they have to take away my status too?" I closed my eyes, and let my head sink into the back of the couch. I felt my mother's warm, nurturing hands caress my face; her petite, plump fingers glide through my long, straight, ebony hair.

"Look at me, Aylene," she said, her voice tranquil and soothing. I didn't want to listen to her, I wanted to close my eyes forever and make the world around me disappear. "Aylene," she whispered, "look at me baby." I yielded to her voice, and opened my eyes, her kind, familiar face looked down on me. She smiled. "Let me tell you something that my mother told me long, long ago," she began. "Being native has nothing to do with having 'native-status'; it is something you are born with, it is in your blood. It will always be a part of who you are, and no one can take that away from you. No matter what the government may say Aylene, you will always be native at heart," she leaned in and softly pressed her lips to my forehead. "and that is where it counts the most." she concluded, gently patting her chest. I forced a smile, and kissed her warm, round cheek, then watched her as she slowly stood up, and made her way back to the kitchen.

I knew my mother was right, I knew that being native had nothing to do with a government-issued status card, but I still couldn't help but feel that if I married Daniel, I would be throwing away a part of my heritage forever. I needed to think, needed to figure things out – I needed to talk to Daniel.

Daniel was the most considerate, caring man I had ever met. He was compassionate, understanding, and loyal. He was just over six feet tall, had clear baby blue eyes that sparkled in the sunlight, and curly, golden blonde hair. He was my opposite in appearance, and he was definitely not of native descent – but I loved him more than anything else in the world.

"I love you Daniel, more than you'll ever know. I'm just really confused right now – I'm in a situation where no matter what my choice is, I'm going to lose." I concluded, looking at him, waiting for his response. He breathed a heavy sigh, took my hands, and looked deep into my eyes – his crystal blue eyes searching deep inside my own.

"You know I love you Aylene," he began, "and I realize what a hard decision this is for you. I just want you to know that I will love you no matter what decision you choose to make." He paused, looked down, grasped my hands tighter, and then looked back up at me. I could feel his gaze wash over my face like the gentle breeze of a warm southern wind. "I just want you to know, that I believe that you are who you are – no matter what anyone else says. You are from a strong native heritage, and that is a part of who you are, and it always will be. You will always be native at heart Aylene, no one can ever change that." he said, his voice gentle, yet strong. He raised his hand to my face, carefully caressing every curve and contour. His hand moved gently through my hair,



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coming to rest at the base of my neck. He pulled me in close and slowly leaned in, his lips softly pressing against mine. His lips were soft, warm, familiar. I found comfort in that moment, in his kiss; and it was with that kiss, that I felt all my worries melt away.

“Are you ready Aylen?” Daniel asked me. It had been nearly two years since I had my talk with Daniel. I looked down at my swollen stomach, and rubbed it gently.

“Yes,” I said, smiling up at him. We were on our way to my doctor; I was in my third trimester and was due for a check up. Daniel held my hand, and helped me into the car. He sat down in the driver’s seat, and put the keys into the ignition.

“I love you, you know.” Daniel said, looking over at me. He still had that sparkle in his eyes.

“I know you do.” I replied, smiling. He smiled back at me, and then started the car. I looked out the window, and watched as the trees become nothing but a green blur. I felt a little kick coming from my stomach, and I was reminded of the life that was inside me. A life that had not yet begun, but was already loved. I thought of the baby, a girl, the doctor had told me, my daughter.

She was the greatest thing that would ever happen to me, because it was then that I realized that this little miracle wasn’t just white, and she wasn’t just native. She was a combination of the two – she had unified both races. And although a part of her would be white, the other would be native, and that part of her, that part of *me*, would live on forever. She may never be able to have ‘native-status’, but she will always be native at heart, and that, as my mother once told me, is where it counts the most.

Author’s Statement

In 1876, the Canadian government passed the “Indian Act”, which allowed them to have almost complete control over how Indians lived and interacted with the rest of society. One of the many rules and regulations of the “Indian Act” stated that upon marriage, an Indian groom conferred status on his non-Indian wife, while the Indian bride of a non-Indian man lost her status.

I chose to write a story concerning this issue because it is a decision that my great-great grandmother had to make herself when she was a young woman. This story takes place in a time period where life was incredibly hard for all aboriginal people. Residential schools were in effect – destroying aboriginal children’s cultural beliefs, hope, faith, and security. In a time where hope and faith for a better future was rare, one



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young woman must face her fear of losing the only thing she has left that distinguishes her heritage.

Native At Heart is about a young native woman in the early 1940's who has fallen in love with a non-native man. Her struggle throughout the story is the inevitable choice she must choose to make – to keep her native-status, or to marry the love of her life. With the loving help of family and friends, she must look deep inside herself and determine who she really is, and who she will be for the rest of her life.