

ALL MY RELATIONS

PssssttWho are they anyway?????

Leanne Poitras Kelly

Hmmm, I am so stupid ... if only I can find the number of the house ... I hope they're not all waiting impatiently for me ... oh damn ... I must have missed it. Okay, now don't get flustered ... just turn around and go back ... you will find it. Okay ... 219 ... hmmm, where the hell ... let me see that map again ... oh damn ... it's 291 ... okay, go back again. Here we are, finally. I hope they are not too upset with me....

"Hi, Lauralyn. Hi, Robina. I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

"No, we had lunch and a visit ... no problem Christine's up at the house, we came down to help you carry the baby up"

"Wow, what a great home you have, Christine, beautiful fresh flowers. What are they anyway? Hmmm, sweet peas...."

"I like your mom's flowers, Tanis."

"Yeah, she plants them every spring. Why don't you have any in your yard?"

"My mom works a lot and she doesn't have time to plant any flowers. But we have lots of peas and potatoes and beans."

"Maybe my mom will give you some flowers Let's go ask"

"I can cut you a bunch and put them in a vase. Just wait here on the steps"

"Yeah...that's the little girl from next door. Her mom works at the factory and her dad is with the CN I hear. They seem nice enough, but not much money. The dad drinks most of it up I hear Hmmm? Yeah, I think they are Indians. That little one sure gets black in the summer Hmmm? No,

I don't mind her playing with Tanis, they seem to get along okay. As long as she doesn't give her any lice ... she's got that long stringy hair, lots of split ends. What she needs is good hair cut"

"Here you go, Leanne, you can take them for your mom. They're sweet peas, just make sure you bring the vase back."

"See, I told you my mom would give you some. Don't they smell pretty? I just love sweet peas...."

"Yeah, they do. What's a vase?"

I really liked my long stringy and split end hair. I didn't even really know what split ends were. I remember asking my mom when she got home from work that day. "Why?" she wanted to know. "Because I heard Mrs Bailey talking to her friend about my hair. She said I needed a good hair cut." That was the end of that conversation, until the next time my mom got paid. We went to the hairdresser and got my hair cut. I hated it. All my nice long hair on the floor. But now I didn't have split ends, I guess.

It's funny how a certain smell, a certain sound, or piece of music can suddenly take you back to a time and place. The sweet peas in Christine's house immediately reminded me of that time as a kid in Mrs. Bailey's yard. Although it seems like an innocent enough exchange, it represents a common theme in my life, the need for approval from others. I remember that I felt a bit funny about being talked about, and I knew that having split ends was not a good thing, but most of all, I felt the tension rise in the room when I told my mom what had happened. She didn't say much,

but her actions spoke for her. At the time I didn't even understand what was happening. I just incorporated it all into my mind and my being. It must be related to the split ends, I thought, or at the very least the fact that they were talking about me. My mom didn't like it when I talked about others, so that must be it. Now as I look back I can understand so clearly my mom's reaction. I could go months without a haircut, but once it became an object for discussion by others, then we would rise to action.

THE BEGINNING

My mom, Rose, was born in 1926 in the Qu'appelle valley. She was born at home, in the area known as Katepwa. Half-breed country. She was the oldest of nine children and therefore had certain expectations placed on her by her family. She was to help out in the home. She doesn't talk much about her younger years. And when she does it is usually about the hard times. I can rarely remember mom telling a story about a party or laughter or fond memories. They are all about painful things that have hurt her. The way her brothers and sisters were, the huge responsibility of taking up the slack of child rearing or the way that the outside world regarded her. It is without bitterness, however, that she tell these stories. She regards them as hazy memories that have gone by and not to be dwelled upon. I think that she has an underlying theory that she was placed on this earth to suffer, both small hurts and large ones and that by doing so she will buy her way to glorious afterlife. So she suffers as a matter of course, sacrificing many things for her children and holding dear the memories of the life she has led.

My mom has only three years of formal education. She was not allowed to go to school until she was eleven years old, then stayed only until she was fourteen. Being the oldest and largest child in grade one was not an easy thing to endure. Taunting and ridicule were very much a part of her days. At the age of fourteen, however, the taunting at school ended. My grandfather arranged for her to leave home and go to work at the home of a white farmer. He had been drinking on the weekend as usual and ended up owing money to the man.

Money he did not have. Unfortunately for my mom, she was to clear his debt with her labour, and then continue on for the foreseeable future. My mother's future was now cast.

In those days, life in the valley as a half-breed was not easy. My mom rarely talks about the days of her youth. Most of what I know of I have heard from my aunts. I know that taunting and torment to the point of tears was a part of her daily life. I know that she was afraid of the Indians in the Lebrét Residential school. And I know that living with my grandfather was a nightmarish experience. My grandfather was an alcoholic with all the trimmings. He beat my Gran. He drank up the few earnings he contributed to the household. He would be gone for weeks at a time and leave my mom's family alone and he rarely displayed any affection for anyone, unless it was the inappropriate sexual molestation of one of his grandchildren. Horrific as that may sound, I don't think it was all that uncommon a scenario in the valley. A secret scenario, yes, but not an uncommon one.

MARRIED LIFE AND FAMILY

My mom eventually met my dad, Alex. He was a charismatic, good-looking charmer eight years her senior. A year prior to marrying him she had been living in Montreal working in a factory. She was independent, earning her own living, and enjoying her life. She tells me that it was loneliness for the land and her family that brought her back. My aunts say it was Alex. The man with the brilliant smile and twinkling eyes. She came back to be with him. She came back and within a few months she was pregnant. They were married three months later on a cold and blustery March day. My eldest sister was born 4 months later. It is strange that I never knew that my mom "had" to get married. She is always going on about morals and the laws of God and the Catholic church, so I just assumed that she was a staunch follower of those laws. It wasn't until 1993 when she decided to go to Australia to see my brother that she had to "come clean." I helped her with her passport application, and when she said her year of marriage, she hesitated but the truth came out. It never registered with me at the time but later that night, when I

realized the math, I was flabbergasted! My mom? Sex before marriage? I couldn't believe it. For years, it was a secret from me even though all my siblings knew. So I left it as such and never said anything to her. That is the way it is in our family. Don't talk about it and maybe it didn't happen. The key to success is denial.

The marriage that ensued after that cold prairie wedding day had many aspects of the hardships and heartache of the life she left behind. My dad turned out to be as difficult as he was charismatic. His alcoholic haze was tempered only by the fact that he worked hard at his job. He didn't necessarily give a lot of money to Mom for the house, but he did work hard. They moved from small town to small town living mostly in ill-equipped CNR houses that lacked running water or other modern amenities. She had seven children and very little support from her partner. Knowing the hardships she endured, I look with awe upon her abilities as a parent, and I feel very pampered in my affluent urban life.

She used to say that just because we were poor didn't mean we had to be dirty. She was very proud of her children, spotless and well groomed, articulate and polite. Time was spent at the supper table learning how to use utensils and say "please pass the" Mom told me that once she told my brothers and sisters that they were getting a guest for supper so they had to get all cleaned up. They were running around heating up water and washing themselves. They sat tittering with excitement at the table, with their demeanours full of the manners of polite society. After they were all nicely seated for supper Mom brought out a doll from the girls' bedrooms. It was their "guest." They all groaned "I just wanted you to practice your manners for when we do have a guest," she said. She was bound and determined to make them into well behaved little children and eventually well behaved adults. Image. A good image was important. There was no way people were going to say anything negative about her children. No, she would never let that happen.

THE WORDS

I remember that I once heard my grandfather and an auntie speaking some strange

words. It sounded like Chinese or something, and then I caught a word I knew. It was something in French. I was taking grade seven French at the time so I knew a few words but the way we said them in class did not sound like this. And I knew that some of the words were definitely not French. But yet they *had* to be. I knew that *comment ça va?* was a French expression, but the way Grampa said it, *Ma ça va* must be slang. And what about *pi cornet?* My mom said it was "little rooster comb." I knew that "little" in French was *petit*, so obviously these people were saying the words wrong or lazily. And what about the *rougarou?* When I asked my French friend Joanne about the *rougarou* that came out during Lent, she looked at me with big laughing eyes and said "the rou what?" And what was *rubbabou?* When I say that word to Mom now she squishes up her face in admonishment, but back then I heard it a lot when we were down in the valley, and would ask what was for supper.

Then there were words like *mushoom*, and *nokom*, and *napew* and *isquewak* that I heard my grandfather say. They didn't sound French to me but when I asked my mom she insisted that they were. "Don't you think I know what my own father is saying?" she would reprimand me. "You've just started taking French, you will learn." She was adamant that *ma langue* was that of the French. "Didn't I ever tell you about my father?" And she would launch into the elaborate story of my great grandfather who was an interpreter for the priests and the trappers. She said that he was fluent in French and English and that he was called upon regularly. Not until much later in life did I learn from an auntie that he was fluent in French, English, Cree and Assiniboine. He was a valued man in his day. I was amazed at this ability. Four languages. My mom totally discounted two of them. She could not bring herself to tell me the accomplishments of a man who had mastered four languages, because two of those were languages that she was vehemently ashamed of. It was much safer to acknowledge the two "legitimate" founding nations of this country than the "illegitimate" ones. *The power of assimilation.*

I remember Mom talking to one of my older sisters one evening. They were in the kitchen and I was in the living room. I don't know why I

focused on this part of their conversation because I hadn't been listening to them. But Mom was talking about being at the rink and watching my older brothers play hockey: "I could hear a couple of women behind me. They were saying what good athletes Dennis and Robert were. One of them asked if the boys were new in town and the other said that we were. Then she said that she thought that the father was Native but she didn't think the mother was." My mom was beaming when she told this story. She was speaking with pride, that not only were her boys being praised but the plan was working! She was fooling them all! No one suspected that she might be Native as well! That moment stays with me. Whenever I wonder why I am so hung up about who I am, that memory flashes back to me. I was raised to pretend. I was raised to try and deny my Métis heritage. As Chrystos says about her father, "he believed that if you assimilated, you would be safe" (Chrystos, 1995). Now I live in a white urban world just as her father did and as my mother trained me to do.

So, my tools to live by were drummed into my being: assimilate, stay inconspicuous, do what is expected of you, be a good girl, and deny any of the difficult things that may be in your past, the hurts will "go away somewhere else" if you don't think of them much. That is what I do. I have learned well the lessons my mother taught me.

SO WHAT ABOUT ME?

"Hey squaw!"

Her ears stung and she shook, fearful of the other words like fists that would follow. For a moment her spirit drained like water from a basin. But she breathed and drew inside her fierce face and screamed till his image disappeared like vapour. (Dumont, 1996)

I grew up in a small town called Redvers. My mom semi-left my dad when I was four and moved into this town. It wasn't far from the last place where we had lived as a "family," the place where my dad still maintained a house and worked for the CN. My mom got a job and bought another house, in all its run down glory. It was hers, it was ours.

My brothers and sisters are all much older than me. I was born eight years after the last son. My brothers and sisters were either all gone from home or on their way out by the time my memories kick in, so for the most part I was left to my own devices to figure out how to fend off the taunts. We were the only dark-skinned people in the town, so of course I stood out like a sore thumb. How on earth was a "darker" supposed to blend in and remain inconspicuous in a place like that? ***Be good my girl, excel at what you do. Don't give "them" a reason to single you out or point fingers at you. Make them believe that you are just as good as they are.***

To this day, when I hear the word squaw I cringe. I hate that word. I didn't even know what it was the first time I heard it. But I remember the tone of voice that the kid used when he called me a squaw. I felt hurt and yet puzzled. I knew it must be a bad word so I was not going to repeat it to my mom to find out what it meant. So I called the kid a squaw myself. I knew it was something you say to insult people. "Hey Eddie you're a squaw!" Mistake. He burst out laughing ... laughing laughing laughing. So loud. He was telling everyone what I had done. Calling him a squaw. They all started laughing. Soon everyone was laughing. I didn't know why. I started to cry. Louder and louder their voices seemed to smother me. "Squaw squaw ... Leanne is the squaw!"

"Mom, what is a squaw?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because some kids at school called me a squaw."

"My girl, that word is an ugly word that people call Indian women."

"So why would they call me that mom? Am I an Indian?"

"No, my girl we are not Indians. We are French. You just remember that and never mind what those kids call you. They don't know anything. We are French and ignore what they say. Don't give them the satisfaction of answering back."

So now I am a little French girl. But yet I knew I was not to go around saying that. I was not to give anyone the satisfaction of hearing my

confusion or hurts. But was I really French? I couldn't speak French. I didn't go to the French mass in Bellegarde like some of the French people in town, like the Poiriers, or the Magotiaux or the Perreaux. But yet would my mom lie to me? No way. I must be French. But why do those kids call me squaw? And why is it so bad to be one?

squaw is to whore
as
Indian maiden is to virgin

squaw is to whore
as
Indian princess is to lady
(Dumont, 1996)

What am I? This question was the frame for my existence. I didn't know what I was. I didn't know that there was a group of people called Métis. When we were down in the valley with my cousins, no one said, "Hey, did you know we are Métis?" And yet I knew that there was something about the valley that held all the answers. My cousins looked like me. Their skin was the same color as mine. Even kids that weren't related had skin like mine. Dark. If only I could bring myself to ask them. But would they laugh? What would I say anyway? "Hey, do you know that we are French?" "Hey, what are we? Hey, why is our skin so much darker than those kids over there?" I was crazy. I couldn't actually say any of these things. They would definitely laugh at me.

So I grew up wondering and fantasizing about the definitive way to tell. *I bet that if you are French you have really straight teeth. I bet if you are French you can tell because the beds of your fingernails turn pink when you press them. I bet if you are French, when you look under your lower eye lid, it is really red and pink. I bet if you are French* On and on it went. Whenever I discovered a new characteristic about myself, I would attribute it to being a possible defining factor of my French roots. I was desperate. I had to know.

Yet there was something inside me that knew all along that I wasn't French. Maybe it was the hesitancy in my mom's voice when the topic came up. Maybe it was the way she would turn off

the tv if a show about Indians came on. Maybe it was the memories of things that happened that didn't seem "French" to me. Like the time we were stranded at the bus depot in Regina. Our next bus to Redvers didn't leave for about eight hours and we didn't want to be sitting there all day. Besides it would be dark soon ... Mom was afraid to be out after six o'clock, in Regina. The drunk Indians came out then. Where they were during the day I did not know. So she called someone named Uncle Joe. He was my grandfather's half brother. He came to pick us up immediately. "Oh, ma fille" he said with great affection to my mom. That sounds French, I thought. But when we got to his place, there were empty beer bottles all over the house. There was a woman trying to tidy up and one trying to cook some lunch. They were dark-skinned like me. It smelled like beer in there. I could feel the tension rise when we got there. My mom hardly batted an eye. She herded us into their kitchen and there we sat beside her for five hours. I could hear the women talking in the other room. Some words sounded French. Other did not. They laughed a low cackling laugh. It was as if they were telling a joke that we didn't get. I felt out of place and wanted to go home. Where were we anyway? I had never met this uncle before. And I never met him again.

And then there was the time that my uncle Harry came to stay with us for a few days. He was my dad's brother. Even though my mom and dad had separate houses, my dad still came to stay with us sometimes. This was one of those times. He and uncle Harry went to the pub. They came home for supper but were so drunk you could smell the beer as they came up the walk. We were sitting at the table eating and trying to pretend everything was all right when Uncle Harry vomited all over supper. Not just once but he kept heaving and heaving. There was puke all over my potatoes. My little nephew Colin, who was living with us, started to cry. I remember my mom jumping up and screaming. Dad started to laugh. Uncle Harry passed out. I just sat there and stared at the barf. I smelled the acrid stench mixed with potatoes and corn. All I could do was stare. Did things like this happen in other people's houses, too? Uncle Harry went to bed. He stayed in bed for three days. He had a box of Pilsner beer under that bed and would

take one out and drink from it whenever he woke up. He peed in his clothes and the whole room smelled. He talked in that language that I couldn't understand but knew that I had heard before. Dad had gone back to work. Uncle Harry was left alone with all of us. I was afraid to go down the hall to the room where he was. I would tip toe and peek into the door. He lay there snorting and grunting and stinking up our whole house. Somehow, I connected this with the question of our race. Who were we? Who was this man who could come into our home and puke and talk funny and drink beer in bed? Did other French people do this?

Then there was the time that my sister attempted suicide. I don't remember any real details about it. All I know is that one evening, my mom and I went to Weyburn to visit her in some kind of hospital. I heard my mom talking to a nurse about my sister. Apparently she had tried to burn the apartment she was living in and had slashed her wrists. Somehow this didn't surprise me. I knew that my sister was troubled even when I was very young. She would look after me while my mom went to work. She would often lock me in the basement and call out names of people I didn't know. She used to tell me that we were descendants of Spanish royalty. There was a fantasy guy she created named "Lord Theaum" who would someday take us all back to Spain with him. Spanish. I never could understand that. Here I was having trouble trying to decide if we were French or Indian and she went and threw Spanish into the mix!

My mom of course denied that my sister ever needed help. She used to get mad when anyone would bring it up. Oh, that girl and her gibberish! She would say it angrily and quickly change the subject. *If we don't talk about it it doesn't exist.*

SCULPTING LEANNE

Mom wanted very definite things for me. She began enrolling me in everything that she could afford. We were poor by anyone's standards but she worked all the overtime she could, she took in sewing and leather repairs, she sold Avon and Amway, just so that she could put me in things that the rest of my brothers and sisters never

experienced. She wanted things to be different for me. She wanted me to fit in and be successful. So I played the piano, I figure skated, I sang in three different choirs, I marched in Cadets, I played school sports, I swam at the pool and became a lifeguard, and I studied my heart out and got good marks. If I got a 86 on an exam, my mom would say "great, but just think of the other 13 marks you could have had if you studied a little bit harder." So I studied harder, and she would go off to fix someone's hockey gloves.

I remember entering the music festival when I was 13 and winning a couple of categories in the piano competition and also placing second in a vocal solo rendition of "My Favorite Things." That year I won a trophy for the "Most Promising Competitor." I flushed when they announced my name. I was surprised and happy but Mom was not there to see it. As usual she was at home doing someone else's sewing. I caught a ride home with a friend's mom, and I walked up the steps to our house and slipped on the ice at the top. I broke the trophy. I went in crying. I sobbed uncontrollably for about 10 minutes. When I think about it now, I don't know if I was crying over the broken trophy, or the fact that my mom wasn't there to see the fruits of her labor, or because now I had even more pressure on me to perform. What exactly was I promising? The most promising competitor. The following year I did not enter at all. I withdrew and pretended that I was sick. *Who am I? The most promising half-breed to ever hit Redvers?*

THE "FINISHED" PRODUCT

Spineless

*the welcome image of you
is gone, the unwelcome
image of me is still here
big, loud and bitching.
bigger still are my myths,
the ones I threaten your small frightened frame
of mind with
now finally shrunken to
life size.*

all you've heard are lies.

*and hear me
bigger than life
too damn wise and smiling
bitch of the north
colder than Jasper and 101st.
in a minus forty wind
waiting for a bus
nose dripping
short a quarter
and too mute to ask for change.*

(Dumont, 1996. p. 32)

When I look back at my life growing up there seems to be more lies about who I wasn't than good memories about who I was. I didn't know who I was. I couldn't ask anyone because that might expose information that my mom didn't want getting out to the public. There were secrets in our house that I could not tell anyone. I wasn't allowed to have friends come over, lest they see something that might expose us. I became and still am very good at lying. I developed systems to remember what lies I had told and to whom. I created many reasons to explain why my dad was never around, why my mom had bruises, why my skin was dark, why I couldn't have friends over. Sometimes I would lie simply because I didn't know how to tell the truth anymore. Deny the truth and create a false reality.

My habits of denial and my ability to lie are shown not only in my words but also in my emotions, behaviors and definitions of who I am. I can be cool and unapproachable, moody and bitchy. I act superior. I am a know-it-all, say some of my family. I think I am better than others, say some Native "friends." These are all responses to how my exterior shell manifests itself on any given day. Do I think I am better than others? No. And yet some vestige of my mom's indoctrination and assimilation efforts manifest as feelings of superiority over the drunks that I may see in the street. Or the young woman in the bar with half her tit hanging out. And yet when I see them I feel frightened inside. Frightened by their exposed flesh, and frightened by my own dense armour and lack of connection with myself. I barricade myself inside a body that exudes a cool stance. I hide behind academic achievement and my mother's

wishes. And yet I am mute when asked how I feel. I can't even defend myself against a simple ignorant racist. My husband has to do that for me. Who the hell am I? What the hell good am I?

THE SQUAW NURSE

I went to university and became a nurse just like my mom wanted me to. I was proud on convocation day. I received two degrees. A BA as well as my BSN. But as I walked into the hall to the sounds of the convocation march, I felt like ducking down among the seats in the Centennial Auditorium. I felt foolish to be there among all those real people who had done something they wanted. I *thought* I wanted to be a nurse. Didn't I?

I got a job after graduation with the federal government in Fort Qu'Appelle, providing nursing service for the reserves in the valley. "You're working where?" my mom asked incredulously. And that was all she said. We never talk about where I work. Even now. After I have been working for nine years, all in the area of First Nations's health, she refuses to become involved in my career. If I mention something, she becomes uncomfortable and will change the subject. Or else she takes a blank tone of voice that suggests that she is not interested and "would you kindly stop talking about it now." I feel hurt but in a benign way. I was Vice-President of the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada for two years. Doesn't she want to know what I am doing? I want to tell people about the kinds of things I am involved in. People that I love and that matter to me. But the woman who has had the greatest influence on my life does not wish to hear it. Why? Indian stuff is ugly. Squaw! "You're a squaw nurse," I say to myself.

My own healing began when I started to work for First Nations people. I re-learned what my mom refused to acknowledge. I felt the beat of drumming, I felt the stirring in my blood. I felt the tears come to my eyes and shivers down my spine when I stood for grand entry at a pow wow. I want to dance a jig when I even think about Batoche. I joined the Métis society and voted in my first non-white election. I campaigned for Maria Campbell when she ran for president. I hung out at the

friendship center and actually made friends! And now I am working on Vancouver Island with a great group of people, as the women's nurse for Cowichan Tribes. Squaw nurse! I smile to myself.

CIRCLE THE WAGONS

There it is again, the circle, that goddamned circle, as if we thought in circles, judged things on the merit of their circularity, as if all we ate was bologna and bannock, drank Tetley tea, so many times "we are" the circle, the medicine wheel, the moon, the womb and sacred hoops, you'd think we were one big tribe, is there nothing more than the circle in the deep structure of native literature? Are my eyes circles yet? Yet I feel compelled to incorporate something circular into the next plot or narrative structure because if it's linear then that proves that I'm a ghost and that native culture really has vanished and what is all this fuss about appropriation anyway? Are my eyes round yet? There are times when I feel that if I don't have a circle or the number four or legend in my poetry, I am lost, just a fading urban Indian caught in all the trappings of Doc Martens, cappuccinos and foreign films but there it is again orbiting, lunar, hoops encompassing your thoughts and canonizing mine, there it is again, circle the wagons

(Dumont, 1996)

Yes, here we are finally getting around to talking about the circle. The first time I heard this reference was at a cross cultural workshop. The woman presenting was white and didn't realize that I was native. (Wow, I fooled one!) I heard all about the rotten things white people did to Indians. How the government is the bad guy and how the Indian culture is all about harmony, sharing and circular thinking. "They do not think linearly like we do." What exactly does that mean? I don't know. But I know I have heard it and used it many times since that introduction to Indian culture that I attended.

So what defines who a native person is?

Again, this is my question. I am not a status Indian, and I am not white. But I know I do not think in circles. Not that I scoff at that image. I think that the ideology behind circular thinking is great. I just know that I am not a circular person. Maybe that is where I am headed but I am not there yet. How does all this circle talk factor into the status/non-status competition? And I say competition because sometimes I have felt that I am regarded by some status people I know as somewhat less of a person because I have no number. Yes, even within the ranks of the oppressed there is oppression and a hierarchy of the haves and have nots. There are those who are considered "in" and those who are "out."

When I was in university, my friend Felix, who is status and now chief of his reserve, and I would sit in Place Riel campus center and attempt to categorize people. We would see a Native person go by and we would turn to each other and call out "assimilated," or "intact." We would laugh ourselves silly because there was no basis for these tags, just our first impressions. If we knew someone and we didn't like them, we were more apt to tag them assimilated as though it were a kind of insult. I look at it now and I wonder how it is I came to the place that I took pleasure in laughing at others randomly. Somehow, calling others "assimilated" made me feel just a little less so.

NOW WHAT?

Now as a mother of my own two sons, products of myself and my Irish husband, I am faced with the question that they will inevitably ask: "What race are we, Mom?" If I say Irish/White, or even if I say nothing and let them believe by default that they are white, I am denying a large part of my own history. If I say Métis, I open old wounds. How can I prepare myself for the building of my sons' identity? I want them to be strong, to love and be generous with all people. To look upon Indians and whites and yellows and blacks and see whatever is in front of them, untainted by the fear of their own racial secrets. I must heal myself.

So, where am I now? I am somewhere in the land of the ghosts, I think. Linda Griffiths talks about feeling like a ghost in her conversations with

Maria Campbell in *The Book of Jessica* (1989). She is speaking about not knowing her roots and finding it difficult to relate when she has no land to stand on: "I feel like a ghost. I go to stand on my ground and find out it's been sold. Where's my ancestral home? The suburban home in Montreal that's sold, and now the suburban home in Kingston that's exactly like it? Is my home this house that I just bought? Do I feel connected to Toronto? Does anybody? This lack of a sense of place makes you feel ghostly" (95). For me, finding my roots and my ancestral home is the key to healing. For me to do this, though, I must first admit some painful truths. I am ashamed to be Métis. I feel ugly when I look in the mirror and see my wide face. When I see a picture of myself I am embarrassed by how dark my skin really is. I am drawn to the white urban world in order to hide. I barricade myself from others in order to avoid detection. I am a liar. I gave up my maiden name in hopes of further hiding my identity. And I dated predominantly white men in order to dilute the blood and distance myself from the dark tenor of my ancestry. Truths are hard to face.

Now I must also balance my truths by speaking of the things that I have learned throughout this journey. I am beautiful to the people who love me for who I am. I can think. I can change. I can control my life. I can decide whether or not to continue in my hiding place. I have the potential to tell the world who I am and then stand back and not care if they turn from me. I can love. I can be loved. I have the potential to be myself without guilt, or fear of ridicule. I love my mom and thank her for all the gifts she has given me. I acknowledge her pain and understand why those hurts were passed along unintentionally. And I thank her for her strength to survive and struggle through. But now it is my time. My time to not pass that pain on to my sons. Time to look in the mirror and admire the strength in those wide cheek bones of mine. Time to love my husband and my sons to the best of my ability. Most of all it is time to admit to myself that I am a Métis woman and that the strength of those Michif-speaking grandmothers and grandfathers, aunties and uncles runs through my veins. My history is one of struggle and *survival*. And that is not so bad.

All my relations!

REFERENCES

Campbell, Maria and Griffiths, Linda . *The Book of Jessica*. Toronto: Coach House, 1989.

Chrystos ."I Give You Seeds of a New Way," in Jane Katz, ed. *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories*. New York: Ballantine, 1995.

Dumont, Marilyn. *A Really Good Brown Girl*. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 1995.