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Dismembered: a memoir

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DISMEMBERED:

A Memoir

By

Janie Bjelland

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Janie Bjelland
May, 2011

Abstract

This is a collection of creative nonfiction essays which address memory, memory loss, and the interruption of brain function and the difficulty in retrieval of memory due to traumatic brain injury, and other post traumatic injuries and diseases.

These creative nonfiction works also investigate identity (in my case, my identity in my family and my race, which is Métis), memoir, truth, and fact, and the many facets and elements that affect and define these. I attempt, and hopefully succeed, at speaking, not only in my own voice, but in the voices of loved ones, ancestors, voices and spirits—besides my own memoirs—that have spoken to me in myriad ways throughout my life.

I write about, with as much honesty and truth as I have so far learned, about my nationality and my family, which is Métis or Aboriginal Canadian. Since my mother died very young, we lost touch with this identity, and so I have had to research much of what I have tried to represent here, and hope I have at least captured the essence or spirit of the Métis people, the people who had become known as Canada's forgotten people: a people fragmented, assimilated, marginalized—in essence, as I have titled this thesis, *dismembered: dismembered like the fragments of my memories that I am still trying to put back together*.

But there is hope for the recovery of these memories, and hope for our people. This is what I would like to have the reader come away with here: not the tragedy or loss, but the hope, the survival, the strength of a people. Because, as Louis Riel predicted we would, we are rising once again—in our art, our song, our music and dance, and other creative endeavors, to become once more, “The True Canadian’s.”

“My people will sleep for one hundred years and when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.” Louis Riel

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements in a thesis are supposed to be academic; “not thank you letters” as one note of instruction has said. But, there is not one person who has touched my life—academic or nonacademic—who has not in some way participated in and therefore deserves “Acknowledgement” “Thanks” “A shake of the hand, and a “gigantic academic hug”

First and foremost: my family:

My husband, Rick, for the endless editing, reading, listening while I read aloud (or pretended to)—and during some very important car races, too; for chauffeuring in the pouring rain, for loading and unloading my wheelchair, my crutches, for catching me—literally—when it was all too much; for holding my hand across the table, chair, couch—even when I didn’t want him to; and lastly, but certainly not least, for keeping the raspberry sorbet and coffee coming, and keeping the bathtub full of hot water and Epson salts.

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To my grandchildren: Calum who kept the music coming, the cello, Rock Band, for the most intelligent conversation I have ever had; to my grandson Kieran, who demonstrated that even with the most adverse of circumstances, you can do anything you put your mind to, and for his stunning abstract paintings that would make Jackson Pollack’s mother proud, and which provided constant creative inspiration; to my grandson, Tristan who is just always there with an understanding and sensitive look, and who is the funniest little man I have ever met. To all of you, you kept me alive with your hugs and kisses and laughter and flying Frisbees and footballs.

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sure everything was taken care of. And the professors, teachers, etc. whose talent, creativity, intelligence, professionalism, and expertise is absolutely, without a doubt, unsurpassed. I'm going to provide names and hope I get them all in—there are so many:

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Laura Laffrado, my committee member, and the most honest, exciting, and excepting and accommodating woman on the planet;

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Dismembered.....	2
Seasons.....	19
Prelude to Shadow Dancing.....	33
Shadow Dancing.....	34

Dismembered:

A memoir

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Janie Bjelland
May, 2011

Introduction

I was involved in three car accidents between March, 1995, and January, 1996, resulting in two head injuries, a brain aneurysm, and many other injuries. I lost much of the memory of several years of my life as a result of these. I was also diagnosed during this time with post-traumatic stress disorder from the accidents and from a traumatic childhood.

My memories—some of them—have come back in bits and pieces, fragments like video flashbacks; some as vague feelings. There are memories that I may never recover. They are just there, shadows of things that may or may not have happened, may or may not ever be extracted, just there, like the brain aneurysm is just there, because it cannot be operated on and removed: the location is inaccessible. Just there, a reminder of what happened, but nothing I or anyone else can quite get at. Maybe that's how most past lives are, most memoirs are: just there, just shadows, waiting to be accessed or left alone.

This thesis, or memoir, if you will, is the process of attempting to recover some of these memories, or maybe it's just the process of memory itself. This process of writing and retrieval of memory has been both difficult and enlightening, and I have discovered some profound truths about myself, about the world I have lived in, and about the people I have loved. I have also discovered that the act of writing and the act of trying to retrieve memory are very similar: both processes lead one on a path to one's own truth, and even if the truth is not discovered, the path is. It is sometimes crooked and rough, sometimes straight and smelling of flowers. But this is the journey to truth: it does not always mean fact, and I certainly may not have everything contained herein completely correct, but the events are as close to the truth as I have so far come to discover in the years since my accidents, and the years since my traumatic childhood.

I also do not intend, in this work, to speak for anyone else, or to speak anyone else's truth; as most of us know, even people raised in the same household by the same parents—in the same way—can grow up with very different stories to tell. But these are my stories, and I do not mean to insinuate that they are anyone else's. And I tell you these stories—my stories—with as much truth as I have thus far discovered in the places in my brain, and in my heart, and I cannot define truth as anything more than that, more than what I have written here in these pages.

Dismembered

There were three accidents, actually. The doctors figured that the first accident in 1995 did most of the damage to my brain: soft tissue sprain of the corpus callosum. Being t-boned at fifty miles an hour will do that. There were two more accidents in 1996...but does the second one count if I can't remember it because twelve hours after the first, I rammed a Gran Prix, planting my face into the steering wheel?

No! Keep your hands away from your face, Mrs. Bjelland, don't touch your face! Do you know where you are?

What? No, Yes, What the. . .What's the deal?

What's wrong with my tongue?

Funny thing about memories: you can lose your glasses, four years of your life, or your entire being. I guess I was the lucky one. I only lost most of the memories of four years of my life. My stepmother got Alzheimer's disease, and lost all that she knew. My biological mother lost herself and died a month after she turned forty one.

Alzheimer's disease had eaten away the special places in my stepmother's brain where she kept the pictures of her first baby, a girl, and the second, third, and fourth—all girls—and then finally her baby boy, who came every day to visit her in the nursing home even though she didn't know who he was. The disease kept eating until it had consumed the image she had of

her first grandchild, a boy, and the time she learned to make coffee and mint jelly and fruit cake. Eventually, it blurred all of the faces and nuances and memories, like the memory of her first dance with my father and the words to their song: *Can I have this dance for the rest of my life?* It took the snapshot of the twelve of us—her five children and Dad’s seven—perched on the lawn before their wedding. It was the last time we were together until my father’s death.

That was in 1994.

.....

We were on the houseboats to renew our vows, and I don’t remember reading my vows to Rick, but I remember seeing them much later: “Rick, it was 17 years ago that we first kissed here in Nelson” and that would make it 1994 and that’s the year Dad died.

Was it July? The houseboats, was it July? It was hot. I remember it was hot, so that must have been when we were on the houseboats.

And Mom was supposed to be there, but we didn’t wait for her. We just took off. We left the harbor in Nelson and I don’t know why we’d do that.

Rick got drunk, very drunk, and I think everyone else did. . . except me. And someone fell off the plank of the boat. Was it Rick?

I remember not drinking.

Mom wouldn’t have remembered the snapshots and faces of that time, either. But she always remembered my father’s face, the man she called the “love of her life.” When she was hospitalized just before her own death, she’d smiled at me with that crooked smile of hers and said, “Fern.” My Dad’s name was Fernald. I had asked if she was seeing Dad, but she just

.....

smiled again, and repeated his name. I didn't care if she was seeing things; she was seeing them with that extra something she'd always had in her eyes and until that moment, the Alzheimer's disease had stolen that too. But as she whispered Dad's name, her heart seemed to be remembering a time that her mind had forgotten.

I often wonder if there was ever that same spark of life in my biological mother's eyes. There are photographs that might, were one to look closely, represent a happier time in her life. But that was long before she married and had children, before hardship and addiction snuffed out the spark. She did many things to try and replace it—the cheap beer and wine, the prescription sedatives and painkillers—but if one looked deep into the black eyes, they would see only pain and longing. It was as though my mother had never had a happier time in her life to remember to get her through the bad times. If there were happier times in her youth, perhaps the drugs and alcohol ate at those memories the way my stepmother's Alzheimer's consumed hers.

My biological mother never reminisced about her past, never looked back in that I-long-for-the-years-gone-by kind of way. She consistently pointed out the alcoholism of my grandfather, the difficult physical work my grandmother had to do, the cruelty of her siblings. And she never said things like “Cherish these years, Jane” or “Be grateful for each day.”

Was I sleeping? I thought I was sleeping. I was told that I tried to commit suicide. . . . I remember being in the car, the Falcon Futura, the car I was in when I had the accidents, and so the car must have been fixed, but I don't remember it being fixed.

But anyway, there was a narrow light at the narrow end of a cone-shaped funnel and lining the cone-shaped funnel were people. Naked people? Spirits? But I had to go through the people and only if I went through the people could I make it out through the narrow end of the cone-shaped funnel. Dying? I don't know if I was dying. . .dreaming? I don't know if I was dreaming. No one was there, not my girls, not Rick, no one but the naked people.

Maybe I was in the car trying to commit suicide.

.....

So maybe my mother never had a childhood or a time that could be called childhood or an imaginary world wherein childhood flourished. She looked for the magic in her music, I think. She was a gifted guitarist, singer, and fiddle and mandolin player. People listening to her play and sing felt her soul, but I don't think she did. So, maybe my mother didn't die of an accidental overdose. Maybe my mother committed suicide. I don't suppose anyone will ever know.

.....

Retrograde amnesia: this is what they call it when you can't remember events previous to a head injury, at least according to the Columbia Encyclopedia, sixth edition. How long of a time period or what particular time period is affected depends on the area of the brain damaged and on the individual. But brain damage due to head injury might also cause *anterograde* amnesia, which interferes with the ability to create new memories. I wonder: if one has both retrograde amnesia and anterograde amnesia, and if one has never made coffee or mint jelly or fruit cake, does one lose the capacity to make coffee or mint jelly or fruit cake? I lost the capacity to make my bed and do the dishes and write my name after my accidents. But perhaps I would have had

the capacity for making fruit cake and mint jelly if Mom could have taught me how to make those things *before* my accidents...and before she got Alzheimer's.

There were too many people living with us and I only remember a few faces and someone said that I invited a few because they were homeless and I remember Doug because Doug had been living in his car and because Doug jumped off a cliff after moved back to the streets and killed himself. But I think Doug hauled me out of the Futura when I was trying to commit suicide and anyway, I remember that Doug and I used to go to the food bank together and I used to think, Wow, he likes to eat green peppers raw like a fruit, and now I like green peppers like that but I don't know if that's because I saw him enjoying them, and Doug and I used to cook beets because I finally had someone in the house who liked beets. My daughters and husband don't.

If I had known before the accidents how to make fruit cake, but had forgotten after the accidents that it was Mom who had taught me how to make the fruit cake, would I have anterograde amnesia or retrograde amnesia? And if I get Alzheimer's disease, how will I know which disease has made me forget about the fruit cake? What if I forget about my stepmother the way I'd almost forgotten about my biological mother, the way she forgot to be happy?

Maybe she had anterograde amnesia and retrograde amnesia due to her alcoholism and drug addiction, and she could neither remember being happy nor able to create new memories. I know she often stayed in bed, where mostly dreams and the nightmares form, and not new memories—unless one can remember the dreams and nightmares. I know she would stay there for days at a time with the shades pulled, and I know that the dark, cold house where there was little food and much anger interfered with my own ability to make new happy memories. I know she staggered a lot: perhaps the mix of drugs and alcohol damaged her brain and affected her memory.

.....

I remember the narcolepsy.

I'm on the couch sleeping and I guess I slept a lot and I ate on the couch and I'm feeling that buzzing feeling I have just before I pass out and I remember that that would happen when the spoon or fork was part way to my mouth—but I don't remember spilling anything and I don't remember actually eating anything.

I remember the narcolepsy.

.....

We liked to believe that Mom was still Mom: sweet, smart, playful, even after the Alzheimer's disease carved a hollow place in her mind. But are you still yourself if you no longer have seventy-eight years of snapshots and memories? Are you still yourself if you can smile and laugh? She hardly spoke in that final year of her life, but she smiled and she laughed. Half the time, she didn't know what she was laughing at or who she was smiling at, but she smiled and laughed, nonetheless.

The nurses called her Dot. She knew she was Dot, but she didn't know why. Dad had called her Dot, but she probably didn't remember that. Most of the time she didn't mind not remembering. When my friend's father had Alzheimer's disease, he had moments when he knew that the bits and pieces of who he was were being swallowed up and that there was nothing he could do about it. I was glad my stepmother did not have those moments. My baby sister was always anxious about her care, but she spent her days strutting about the nursing home, living day to day in a life she was convinced was hers anyway. She'd put on her crooked grin and follow the nurses from room to room, pretending to help them with their office work or their chores. They even started coming to her room in the morning to collect her: *Come on, Dot. It's time to make our rounds* or, *We need you in the office today, Dot. Lots of filing to do.*

.....

Some of my stepsisters didn't go to visit Mom those last few months: they were afraid she wouldn't know them. She didn't, but they didn't want to know that. They wanted to remember their mother before the disease, the image they carried in *their* own special places in their minds. They wanted to remember the time she had stood at the kitchen sink, carrot peelings all over the counter, grinning, feeding Dad all the baby carrots with her hands dripping wet, because she knew he loved them straight from the garden. He never minded the water dripping down his chin. I don't remember him minding anything Mom did.

My sisters wanted to remember how Mom sat in her plaid yellow easy chair every evening, Dad seated next to her in his own plaid yellow chair. They wanted to remember her sitting there with her knitting in her lap, her hand stretched across to hold Dad's. Or the times she chased Cuddles, the family dog, down the hall towards Dad, and Dad holding out his arms for Cuddles to jump in, and Cuddles skidding by sideways on the wood floor as though Mom had wound her up, like she did the miniature wind-up cars the grandkids played with.

I'm seeing a small blue blanket that I left at my sister's house—I don't remember going to my sister's house or anywhere else for that matter, which is unusual because I would have taken a bus to Calgary, which is a long ways to take a bus and not remember—and anyway, the blue blanket is covered with burn holes, but I don't remember burning the blanket and I assume it's because of the narcolepsy and because I smoked, and I'm remembering falling asleep with a cigarette halfway to my lips.

I don't want to ask my girls or my husband, Rick, if this is true in case I burned something of theirs. I was told we had a fire in our house. Did I start the fire?

.....

A study of memory by Dr. Piotr Wozniak says that all knowledge is subject to gradual decay. Apparently, you can even forget your own name. But Dr. Wozniak says this has the "probability of getting hit by an asteroid." I wonder if the number of Alzheimer's patients has finally become high enough to change this to the "probability of landing a man on the moon."

If I had retrograde amnesia, what would be the probability that I would remember that my biological mother had died of an overdose at the age of forty one? If I had anterograde amnesia, what would be the probability of remembering the thirtieth anniversary of her death which took place after my auto accidents?

.....

My fortieth birthday and I'm in the car listening to a Beatles CD I bought myself, and I'm sitting in the car, in my Falcon Futura outside of my daughter's lounge with the windows closed and I'm rocking out and I'm alone and if this is my fortieth birthday, why am I alone?

If this is my fortieth birthday, then it's July 1st, and that means that my father died only a couple of months ago and so if it's my fortieth birthday right after my father died, why am I alone?

.....

I don't remember much of the years surrounding the accidents and only certain things from long past; I also don't remember much about not remembering. The word hazy comes to mind,

but that's not because I remember being hazy. Perhaps that's because I had both anterograde amnesia and retrograde amnesia. . .perhaps. Perhaps it's because it was such a painful and chaotic time in my life. I've heard that your brain can block out images and memories when they are too difficult to bear. But in order to know if this is true, I would have to try to gather together the scattered memories and identify them as being too difficult to bear. Sometimes just knowing they are out there waiting for me to come looking for them is the difficult thing. But is it the lost memories that are hard to bear or the fact that they are lost? Maybe my friend's father could have answered that in those frightening early stages of his disease.

.....

We moved to the farm after my father-in-law died and I don't remember much about the farm except the sun coming through the upstairs window and reflecting off of the slanted roof and I remember all of the trees on the seven acres and I was told that we logged the trees so that we could have the money to pay for the farm.

But we lost the farm and then we tried to rent the farm and then the people that rented the farm stole all of our equipment and I learned later that they stole my paints and my easel and I don't remember painting after that.

And I don't remember the fire but I remember being burned and I don't know why I was burned and I don't remember why we lost the farm or why we moved again and this was right after my auto accidents and I remember being on the couch and in bed in this new place and I remember that I attacked my daughter's boyfriend because he pushed her down and I remember jumping on his back and punching his face and I remember that he slammed me into the fridge.

And I remember that my daughter still liked him and I found out later that he was something called a "skin head" and I don't know why I would ever let anyone into my family that was like

that and I don't remember seeing him after that night and I don't think that I would remember his face if I did.

In studying how mnemonic techniques reduce the difficulty in remembering things, it has been decided that these techniques, although able to reduce memory loss, cannot always produce everlasting memories; one must still use repetition to retain the memories. My stepmother slowly lost the memories that enabled her to do the things she'd always done, the little things like making coffee and making the fruit cake, and when she went to the nursing home, she never had the chance to make the things she knew how to make so she could remember how to make them. She pretended to do things like make coffee and wash dishes, but does that count as repetition? Perhaps she went into the nursing home too soon, as all nursing home patients do, and so she never had the chance to "repeat" the things she'd forgotten. We will never know now no matter how many times we recalculate the probability.

According to my husband, I had some memory of the years surrounding the accidents shortly after I was involved in them, perhaps except for the accidents themselves, but lost much of this memory as I healed, and as the brain aneurysm developed. But I had not forgotten how to do certain things like cook and clean, although I don't think I was able to do most of those things because of the problems I was having physically: the numbness and pain in my legs, muscle jerks and spasms called myoclonus, and the problems with ligaments in my spine. However, I must have seemed okay to most people, and I was, according to my husband, getting out and going

places. It was actually while getting out and going camping that I first realized that I was retaining memory. Perhaps this is because we were camping in a place we had been going to for years. Being able to retain memory was the beginning—according to my husband, as this time was still somewhat shadowy for me—of my awareness of the gap that I had in memories before and after the accidents.

.....

What happened to your face? What's wrong with you? What's that hole in your mouth?

Don't you have any teeth?

Fracture to the left Maxilla.

Three inch laceration to the oral facia...

Expulsion of the first, second, third, fourth molars. . .implantation into the buccal mucosa...Expulsion and fracture of the bottom four. . .

Poor oral hygiene, dried blood on the right front. . .

.....

The doctors who treated me—and there were many—pieced things together slowly, even over a number of years, and some probably still have not figured out exactly what happened. But, of course, neither have I. The not knowing did most of the damage to my life. I even drove a vehicle after the first accident from which I had suffered most of the damage to my brain, and this 'driving while not fully coherent' was at least partly responsible for the second and third accidents, but since I don't remember these, I guess I will never know. I apparently did remember the second accident long enough to tell my husband about it, but I have now lost all memory of it.

Rick, you need to pick me up, I've been in an accident.

I guess I was in two accidents, one last night.

What happened?

I don't know, but there's a piece of paper with someone's name on it on the seat.

Who's name?

The guy who hit me?

I thought you hit a Gran Prix.

That was the second accident.

I have to go home. Come and get me.

What I have learned since these accidents is that because there was nothing that the emergency doctors could detect on a CT scan—the corpus callosum is soft muscle tissue and a sprain doesn't appear on x-ray—they had sent me home from the hospital the morning after my accidents. I came back within twenty four hours to the Emergency Room because of panic over my inability to function mentally or physically, and, according to documents I remember reading at some point in the first year or so, I continued to return to the ER over and over again: apparently over a dozen times in one month. One of the doctors I'd had during those first months after my accidents said that it was not so much the injury itself that was the cause of my memory loss, but my body's reaction to it. My stepmother's reaction to the loss of her memories was to recreate her life. She smiled, and she created new memories. There were angry Alzheimer's patients at the nursing home, who, like my biological mother, were probably

angry before the memory loss, and who, like her, had probably lost the capacity or desire to make new memories.

There were also patients in the nursing home who were afraid—like I have come to believe my biological mother was: afraid to live, afraid to make new memories. One patient was so fearful, she would raise her hands in the air and holler “help” the whole time her own son was walking her around the home. Perhaps she was afraid of losing herself the way my biological mother did. Mom never noticed her, though. She would sit on the blue bench and draw me pictures of the house she thought she was redecorating, her index figure making circles on the bench. Once in a while, she would look up and point to something invisible and say something unintelligible, but I knew she was describing the latest change she’d made to her home. She always liked to show me around her home when I came: *Oh, Jane, did I tell you that I put up new curtains in the bedroom? Come and check it out.*

I never completely lost those memories of her leading me through her house, grinning proudly. Like many of the memories that connected me to family and friends, they had been tucked into a sheltered place in my mind, waiting—waiting until a time when I could process these more loving memories with the ones of her wandering down the hall in the nursing home with her pants on backwards.

.....

I could have told my stepsisters that Mom still did all of those things they remembered her doing. She still made coffee and mint jelly and fruit cake; she still peeled vegetables. But she did those things at a make-believe sink in the nursing home. She still walked out to her garden to pluck baby carrots, but the garden was at the end of the hallway in the nursing home. She

still visited her friends, but they had been new friends she visited on the old blue vinyl bench at the end of that same hallway.

She had sat on that bench and talked and talked. Sometimes there was no one there to talk to and sometimes there was; sometimes another resident would stop by on her way to her own garden or corner store or to visit sons and daughters who also could not bear to visit their mother. Sometimes there were friends with Mom, and sometimes there were just the snapshots in her head. But she smiled and talked, and when we came to visit, she just kept smiling and talking. She spoke to us as though she knew who we were, as though we'd been there all along. She'd call us Judy or Pam or some other name she remembered from some other time, and we would smile at her because we knew she couldn't go back to the place where she remembered our names. She could never go back.

.....

I cannot always choose which memories come back or when. Some happier memories from a simpler time, years far outside the four or five year loss of memory surrounding the accidents, are gone: the eighth grade graduation of my youngest daughter, moments of my oldest daughter's high school graduation, and visits from family. Faces of friends I had just met, people I lived with during that period of time after the accidents, have vanished—perhaps because of anterograde amnesia—and I would not know these same people if I met them today. Memories of lying in bed all day, day after day, of falling down a lot, of trying to take walks around the block with a walker.

.....

Rick, come and get me, someone slammed my car door and called me a bitch because I parked wrong.

Help me, Rick, I don't know where I am. . . Wait, there's a sign. McDonalds. I'm at McDonalds.

What the hell you doing there?

I don't know. I went for a walk.

Help! I'm in the car! Help, I'm stuck in the car! Help! I'm stuck in the bathroom! Help, please, I don't know where the exit is.

911. Please help, please, I just have all these dishes and boxes and people and I can't buy toothpaste, and I think I took something.

Food? I don't know if I ate. I don't remember eating. Yes, ice-cream yesterday.

911. They took all the money in the bank, they took my husband's instruments. Yes, I let them stay, but they took all of our money.

Yes, I think I took something.

.....

Memories pop in and out, turn on and off like a bad movie. They are unedited, sometimes flashing in vivid Technicolor, sometimes in black and white and seemingly a long way off, but mostly just vague, like the feelings about these things that I no longer seem to have. Some memories, like the ones that would warm me, see me through the subsequent deaths of loved ones, through disease, through the memory of death and disease, are elusive or gone entirely. Yet, there remains hope for these to return, hope for more healing and more remembering. There is no such hope for an Alzheimer's patient—not yet.

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According to the “Supermemo” website, mnemonic techniques can increase learning skill. These techniques can even improve the capacity to learn, which in turn can increase the knowledge learned. This is thought of as a “self-accelerating process.” If I practiced this self-accelerating process, perhaps I could learn from my mistakes at an accelerated level increasing the probability that I would never make another mistake, like leaving my first husband with my kids, or like being a mean sister and not helping to take care of my younger brothers and sisters when my mother died, or being a mean daughter who yelled obscenities at her mother, or like being a mean anything, or like driving my car around with pieces hanging off of it after I’d been t-boned a second time, and passing out at the wheel and ramming the Gran Prix.

One accelerated learning technique or mnemonic technique is called “Practice Makes Perfect.” The idea is to remember a small number of things, like four, then add one, then remember the five things...then add one, then remember six...and so forth. For example, I could remember a broken jaw, eight expelled teeth, broken ribs, and the three-inch laceration to my mouth, then add the two head injuries, then add a brain aneurysm.

.....

Images of those years that I lost flash in front of me from time to time, even the image of that white van as it hit the steel of my Ford Falcon and the sight of the metal door bending as the car and I were propelled over two hundred feet. And I remember words—simple words like “the” and “hello” whose letters were disheveled and strewn about nonsensically on the page, but I don’t remember the frustration of trying to write them, though logic tells me there must have been much frustration and struggle in relearning how to write. I don’t remember the feeling of my legs as they so often would crumble underneath of me, even though I have visions

of myself sprawled on the floor. My face was very bruised and swollen for a long time, and I don't remember one image of it before it was fully healed, or the reaction I might have had had I seen it. If I could remember the faces of people, or the smells or the sense of touch, I might not mind remembering the frustration or the pain, or the numbness in my legs.

Often, I don't even know if some of the flashes of memory are of actual events or are my imagination; regardless, I feel nothing—except perhaps regret—when each vague memory flashes before me like a still-life. I mourn the forgotten years and experiences, but what I mourn is not tangible for that would be mourning something I do not remember. But I do not mourn the person I was, because, for me, like I believe it had been for my step-mother, the person I was was still lurking somewhere deep within me, and I hung on to that shadow of who I'd been. So, some memories will continue to come and go; some will never return, but I believe that the essence of the person I was survived and this is the me that will continue to create new memories. And who knows? Perhaps I will be lucky enough to retain the best of these.

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Seasons

In the Closet, Winter 1963

I'm hiding in the closet, Mom and Dad's closet, but it's just hers now. She sleeps in this room with my baby brother, her seventh child. Seven means something to her, she says. To me, it means Dad sleeps on the couch. But it's the chair most nights. I know because I come and check on him, see him sleeping sitting straight up, chin on his hand. Then his elbow slips off the arm of the chair. Then he jerks straight up again, sputters, falls asleep again, snores.

Maybe we're playing hide-and-go-seek—maybe. Maybe I'm hiding from her and her weapon of choice. She had a three-inch-wide belt with metal studs that she whipped us with, but my brother Tim threw it down one of the holes in the outhouse. Then she used an electrical cord on us. Tim tied that in knots: she used it anyway. Or maybe she had Granny's weapon of choice, the *willow switch*. Maybe the weapon of choice is for someone else. Doesn't matter. Her anger's what sends me hiding, not the weapon of choice.

Or maybe I'm hiding because it's the only way I can be alone. And alone is how I like it most of the time. . .except for my sister, Mo. I find the pictures while I'm hiding, the pictures of Mom and Dad's wedding.

.....

The wedding picture is framed in white. I run my fingers over it: the texture is like her nylons, even has that ring to it when I rub it. I know because I steal her nylons sometimes, pretend to be grown up, dream of leaving. She doesn't like that, says I'll wind up chasing after a bunch of goddamn kids and is that what I want, says I'm a goddamn idiot if that's what I want. I

run my finger over her veil, trace it as it trails down the steps, trace the folds as the veil stops to rest on each step.

My father is looking at my mother. I'd never seen my father looking at my mother the way he's looking at her in the wedding picture. *That's part of the wedding, I think, that's why, because the wedding is different than the marriage.* That's what I think, that's what I'll remember: *the wedding is different. It must be different before the wedding, too,* I think.

.....

Sometimes, I stay in the closet a long time. I stay even though I can't hear her yelling anymore. The closet makes me feel safe. It's small and quiet and warm and I can sink into the clothes at the bottom, wrap the dresses that hang down around me over my back. I feel like I'm in a cocoon. Even when we're playing hide-and-go-seek and I'm found, I stay in the closet sometimes. I like to wrap her long ivory satin wedding dress around my shoulders. It feels different than the red dresses. It covers so much more of me.

I think about how she must have looked in the red dresses with the black velvet polka-dots. I think about it because I'd never seen her wear the red dresses. I saw her getting ready for a dance once, big dance at the community hall, but she wore a red mohair sweater and black elastic pants, had her face powdered. I got to watch her get ready, got to watch her put on her bright red lipstick, watch while she went around and around her thin open lips, then she smacked her lips together, put a tissue between them and smacked again.

"You look pretty, Mom," I'd said. "Thanks, Honey." She'd said. She called me "Honey" sometimes. She called Dad "Honey" too. Sometimes. I remember her asking, "Please, Honey, please. We never go anywhere. Let's just go to the dance. We'll come straight home." I remember my Dad mostly saying no, saying they couldn't afford it, saying they had kids to take

care of, saying she'd just end up drinking again. But I remember both of them coming home drunk so I didn't know why my Dad said that. But he must have said yes the time I watched her put on her bright red lipstick.

I think about the red dresses, think, "those must have been the dresses she wore when she was in the Ament Family Band." That's before the wedding, *too*, I think. But there are no pictures of her in the red dresses, no pictures of her sitting up there on the stage as she must have been, sitting there playing her Gibson guitar, the one she plays when she brings home Marguerite Albrecht and Frank Gileese from the bar when it closes, the one she plays when she makes my sister and I get out of bed to sing for her friends while she plays. When we sing, she says, "Jane, you can't sing your way out of a wet paper bag." I'm not sure what that means, but it makes my brother laugh. I'm not sure what it means, but I know it doesn't mean, "beautiful voice" like she tells Frank and Marguerite my sister has.

"It's school tomorrow, Mom."

"Think you're too goddamn good to sing with your mother! Who the hell you think you are? Miss High and Mighty?" She calls me Miss High and Mighty a lot.

"Think you're some goddamn princess, some high and mighty *White* goddamn princess with your goddamn blue eyes?" I remember how she sings "Beautiful, Beautiful Brown Eyes" and looks at me to see if I'm listening to her. I'm the only blue-eyed child of her seven. Sometimes when she's sober, she plays "Blue-Eyed Elaine" only changes it to "Blue-Eyed Jane" if I cry when she sings "Brown Eyes" and sometimes I cry a lot. She really hates it when I cry, though. When she's drunk or high on her pills like Dad says she is, or both, she really doesn't like me crying, especially when she's drunk or high on her pills "Goddamn baby! Want something to cry about. I'll give you something to cry about, you goddamn baby." "Yah, goddamn baby," my brother says.

“Those sons-a-bitchen nurses,” she says to me as I curl on my side under the only blanket we have: a gray, itchy thing from the Hudson’s Bay Company. We have no sheets or pillows like we get when we stay at Granny’s, no clean, soft flannel, nope, just one of those wool blankets Mom ordered from the Hudson’s Bay catalogue. I think the church gave us a few of them.

“Sons-a-bitchen nurses tried to give you to a White woman. Told me I was too dark-skinned, you were too light-skinned, told me I was mistaken about who my baby was. Said you couldn’t be my baby. Snotty-ass bitches. ‘Think I don’t even know my own baby’, I tol’em. ‘Fucken rights I know my baby!’ I tol’em.” She pokes herself in the chest over and over.

We’re Métis Aboriginal Canadians, only I don’t know that word; neither do my parents or grandparents, not anymore. Maybe none of us ever knew who we were. We knew people called us “half-breeds” or “poor, no-good half-breeds.” I’m not sure what that means, either, but I know that when my mother gets drunk, she says, “I’m a goddamn Indian and proud of it!” “Yah, my brother says, “Proud of it.” She defines half-breeds for me when she’s drunk, too: “Those damn Alexises, saying they’re Indian. They aint Indian. Ther nothin’ but a bunch of no-good half-breeds.”

My birth certificate says that my mother’s race is *French-Canadian—I believe my mother wrote this*. Her birth certificate—the one we found thirty years after her death—says her Dad’s an *Indian*, her mother, a *half-breed*.

“Fucken right I tol’em!” She pokes herself hard, the ashes from her cigarette fall on the gray blanket.

Like every time she tells me the story, I wish she’d been asleep when the nurses brought me to the room.

"I know, Mom, you told me." *Jesus, I hate you.* I tell her this out loud a lot, just not tonight. She always says I'll be sorry, says someday I'll have my own kids and I'll be sorry. "You'll see, Miss High and Mighty," she says, "They'll shit all over you." I don't know what that means.

She slaps the side of my head. "Think you're too fucken good to sing with your mother?" No, I didn't think I was too good. "No, I don't think that, Mom. Just need to get some sleep, okay." I stick my fingers in my ears so I can't hear her. She gives me another slap on the side of my head. I try to think of Granny's feather-tic bed and her flannel sheets. "High and Mighty Princess, that's all you are. Good for nothing's more like it, stickin' your nose in the air."

My three sisters sleep with me. Two of my brothers sleep in the next bed in the same room. As Mom goes through the gray blanket hung over the doorway, my brother Tim says, "You do think your shit don't stink. Hope she got you good."

Summer of 66

We build sandcastles, play hit-the-can, draw hopscotch squares and smiley faces on sidewalks. Dad and Tim build a playhouse, our fortress of let's pretend: let's pretend we're children, let's pretend there are no chores, no floors to scrub, no clothes to wash, no welts on our backs.

I hide in the fortress a lot, eat some things I've snuck out of the house. One time I snuck out some bleach to clean our plywood walls in the playhouse, put it in a tin can that had had spam in it. My sister, Cheryl thought it was apple juice and took a sip of it. She thought she was going to die. I thought she was going to die. But all we could think of was that we didn't want a whipping for taking things out of the house. My friend, Lynn and I gave her water and bread

then more water and bread until she started to choke and we had to stop. I had hoped she was okay anyway so that Mom wouldn't find all of the other stuff I'd snuck out and really whip us.

"More bleach," my mother says. She staggers into the kitchen, bounces off the door jams. "Are you afraid to get your sum-bitchin' hands in there?" she says. "Scrub in the goddamn corners for Christ's sake! My mother's floors were so clean you could eat off em," she says.

"Yah, but you didn't clean 'em," I say.

"Think you're smart, you little bitch." She picks up the pail of dirty water, dumps it on the clean floor we'd just finished scrubbing, then kicks me in back while I kneel on the floor, rag in my hand. "Now do it over," she says. My sister, Mo gives me that, *Did-you-have-to-open-your-big-mouth look*.

Summer is hot, stretches into rich red sunsets stretches into warm evenings stretches into full-moon nights. Mo and I sleep outside in the summer, sometimes every night. No sleeping bags, just a jacket or two underneath of us, a blanket to share. In a town with one streetlight, we count the stars.

"There's the Little Dipper. Where's the North Star?" Mo says.

"Check out the handle on the Big Dipper." I say.

June is softball, track, and red ribbons. I remember the red ribbons, because the red ribbons meant you were first. I am always first, except once, except when I go to high school and meet Holly who beat me in the two-hundred and twenty yard dash. I stick to sprints so that after that I'm always first. Mom doesn't come. Doesn't see me lose, doesn't see me win. Doesn't matter.

I got fast from running from her and Granny and their willow switches. And we know Dads, they always work.

“You’re nothing but a bird-brain dreamer, Jane. Of course your Dad can’t go! Your father makes two son-of-a-bitchen bucks an hour. Don’t know how the hell he expects me to raise seven goddamn kids on two dollars and fifty cents an hour? If he worked twenty-four hours a goddamn day, we wouldn’t have enough.”

Doesn’t matter that Mom and Dad don’t come to track and field meets: that’s not where I did most of my running. I ran in the cool grass and on the hot pavement, and the rough sand near the edge of the sloughs. I felt free when I ran, when I tipped my head towards the hot Alberta sun, and just ran. Blistered pink, I ran over dirt tracks, over roads still steaming with tar, over dry brittle grass, bare feet hardly touching the ground. I thought I could fly, I thought I could jump into the redolence of that strong June breeze, cardboard tied to my back, and fly.

We tall thought summer would last forever, ooze by like thick maple syrup, syrup, squeezed slowly through cheesecloth, purified. Nothing lasts forever, though. We don’t know it, but we are about to learn that soon.

We don’t have a car. Dad hitch-hikes back and forth to work in Whitecourt, the next town up the road. He works in the planer until the plant closes, then he gets a pick-up job as one of the carpenters on a new house in Whitecourt. One night, he comes home late: 7:00 pm. It’s still light but my mom is mad because Dad’s late. She puts us to bed early.

“If that son-of-a-bitch thinks he can screw around on me and waltz in here like nobody’s business, he’s got another think coming.” She jams a knife in the door to lock him out of the house.

We don't have a lock. A table knife between the door and the door jam stops the wind from blowing it open. We don't have thieves, just the wind. Lots of times, when Mom or Tim or Mo's chasing me with something, I slam my face into the door because I can't get it open fast enough because of the knife.

After Mom goes to sleep that night, I sneak out and sleep on the couch in the living room. That way, I can stay awake and listen for Dad, even though I know Mom isn't going to wake up: She's taken her sleeping pills. Had been taking them all day. When I hear Dad start to try and open the door, I jump up, jerk the knife out, open the door. "What the hell's going on around here?" he yells.

"Nothing." I say "Nothing, Dad. Please. Don't wake her up. Just come in and be quiet, okay. The Little Ones are asleep." We call the three youngest kids, the Little Ones.

Dad comes and sits in his wooden chair in the living room, reads his Louis L'Amour book. He doesn't eat that night. He usually cooks. But he doesn't cook that night. That's not the first time any of us skips a meal. He falls asleep in his chair again.

Fall, 1970

Summer leaves too soon, bows to the onslaught of an Alberta winter. Summer stars fade to Northern Lights, chamomile and saskatoons succumb to the chill of autumn. Wagon wheels and

go carts are left on the broken planks of wooden sidewalks, childhood fingerprints are still clinging to them

We strip off pedalpushers, don turtlenecks, send for checkered corduroy and winter underwear from the Sears catalogue, because winter's freezing temperatures are unforgiving, because its snow suffocates our sandcastles, traps the lavender and the wild roses in dead deciduous.

But in winter, Granny makes the feather beds with flannel when we stay, stokes the pot-bellied stove with alder. Dad and two of my brothers will kill another moose, but Grandpa is crippled, and will spend the winter, back bent in his willow chair, in his woolen pants held up by suspenders, sit by the stove and warm his bent hands while Granny pounds the dried moosemeat to pemmican, pours maple syrup over it, pours bacon grease over it. We dip our bannock in it, lay by the stove when we're full, watch Granny sew moccasins and new flannel pajamas. She makes new ones for us every month.

Fall, 1970

My first year of high school. But Blue Ridge has no high school. go to Mayerthorpe, a farm town the opposite direction from Whitecourt. Fifteen minutes by Highway 43, forty-five on back roads, ruts, farmland, in a school bus left over from 1960. I hate high school: my sister, Mo is two years younger and has to stay at the Blue Ridge school.

We are both beginning to date: officially, school dances, sock hops with Neil Diamond, Tommy James and Tommy Roe; unofficially, necking in the back seat, strip poker in the attic over the coal shed, young bodies wrapped in experimental lust: Mexican Jones, Kelly Anderson. I am fifteen, my sister thirteen. We giggle behind our hands over the latest hickies, compare

college-ruled notebooks: on their covers, initials carved in red hearts with permanent ink because we thought love would last forever.

Winter

I toss and turn, try unsuccessfully to tug a corner of the blanket out from under my sister, Mo. It's January 21st, 1970. Daytime temperatures don't rise above freezing even on the sunniest days. Blizzard winds pack the snow up so deep against the house, it's hard to open the back door. The forty-mile-an-hour winds whine through the cracks in the windows and doors, slap the walls. But, it's not the wind that wakes me up this night. There's a deep whirring noise as though someone is stuck in the ditch. I keep thinking, *who's driving out in this weather*.

At around 1:00am, I get up, go to the living room where my brother is asleep on the chair. "What's that noise," I say. "I don't know. Go back to bed," he says. He's three years older than me, officially an adult. I listen. Dad's not on the couch, I hope he's sleeping with Mom.

3:00am: My brother is screaming, guttural sounds that pummel the air: crescendo, fall, crescendo, fall. Dad rushes by me as I stand in the bedroom doorway half asleep, confused. He is gripping a body twisted in gray wool, his eyes wide. I can't see who's wrapped in Dad's arms like a rigid baby. Dad doesn't see me. His face is paralyzed in this moment of terror. "Doctor, I think my wife is dead," he says into the phone, drops it. Tim unknifes the door, they all rush through it: Tim, Dad, and Mom in Dad's arms like a lifeless baby.

January 28, 1970

A week after Mom dies, we're staying with our Aunty Frances, who is actually our cousin, but is older than my mother, like so many of our cousins, because Mom is the baby of thirteen children. So we call her Aunty. Anyway, we're staying with my Aunty Frances in Edmonton, and the phone rings. Aunty Francis answers, and I look her right in the eyes—I remember that—looking her right in the eyes as she put the receiver down.

Aunty turns away from me and says to my dad, "Fern (my Dad's name is Fernald), Granny is dead."

All twelve of my mother's siblings had gone to the nursing home when Mom died to tell my Granny. My mother was the baby of the family, and my grandmother had already lost two children.

"Evy," that's what our family called my mom, "Evy is dead, Mom. She died of an overdose the doctor said." Granny went to sleep at that moment—a comma, the doctors called it. My aunts and uncles told us later, "Granny went to sleep when we told her your mom died, went to sleep and never woke up again." I never understood this then, but my grandparents are Aboriginal and I think Granny figured it was time to die, and so she did.

Dad says to us kids, "Kids, your grandmother is dead."

"I can't cry anymore," my sister says. I want to be brave like my sister.

"Me too," I say, "Me too, I can't cry anymore."

Spring of 70 and 71

Our mother hadn't yet told us about hormones or the function of body parts or marriage or love or babies. About how a baby too soon would keep us walking down the same marked and

worn paths she walked, her mother walked, eyes only on the next step and the next. But the children my sister and I became responsible for—five, seven, nine, eleven—were hers, not ours. Only I didn't stick around much. Mo did. At 13, Mo did. My brother Tim and my Dad get drunk, at lot, stay drunk. I took off, lived on the streets a lot. Shot up a lot of drugs.

High school becomes a blur of failed grades, drugs, housework, the occasional times that Dad shows up at our party-house, not to drag me out of there, but to join the party. There are syringes and extra hits of MDA, but he doesn't seem to see them or care. He falls asleep at the party house a lot, sometimes standing up, Labatt's Blue or a micky of whiskey in his hand.

At high school one day, my grade ten typing, shorthand, bookkeeping teacher asks me why I'm not doing any work one Monday. "Because I don't feel like it," I say. "Go out into the hall," she says. "Okay," I say. I fail grade ten.

A Cold Night in 1972

It's near forty degrees below zero. I am sixteen, downtown Edmonton: junkies, prostitutes, wine-os and everyone else stuck in the hell hole between the haves and the have-nots. It is bitter here where reality spins and time crawls. I am one of the junkies. Close to the outer reaches of my world are a mother and a child, huddled together in what must have once been a brilliant red shawl. Its faded and tattered edges brush the urine stains and cigarette butts on the cold cement. The mother's thin arms are clutching her screaming child and her cracked lips rest against its forehead, "ssh, ssh, hush now." She glares at me with sunken, pleading eyes. I

am staring blankly at my own sallow skin and yellow bruises, and her plea drifts, unavailing, into my emptiness —there to mingle with the blinking street lights and the screams of the police and ambulance cars...

Older, 1972

I meet a nice guy at a bar the night before my eighteenth birthday. He's eight years older than me, a real man who's working a real job, a truck driver from Whitecourt. We fall in love—I fall in love, we marry, it asts five years and we have two kids. One day, Dad comes to his house where we've spent the night, just a few nights after we've met. Dad's drinking with my boyfriend's sister and she brings him upstairs. "Oh, no, Dad," I say. "I better go, Yvonne," Dad says.

The next day, Dad says, "I shoulda been a better father these past couple years." "Dad, what you saw, well, it's not like that, we're in love," I say. "I shoulda done better," my Dad says. "Dad," I say, you've been doing great, really." "I shoulda done better," my Dad says.

Life is Better, 1975.

My daughter is snuggled next to me on our first couch and we are looking at old photographs together. We see the photograph of my mother and dad's wedding. "This is your grandmother, I say, "You didn't know her." This is their wedding. Yup, September, 1950. She looks at them standing at the church steps, sunlight reflecting on them at the top of the church steps." Mom's veil goes to the bottom of the church steps, her gown is ivory satin, white satin buttons. She's

looking at Dad like she's dreaming. Her brown skin is glowing, her dress is reflected in my Dad's black suit, which turns it to phosphorescence in the sunlight. "She looks pretty, Mommy."

"Thank you, honey. Yes, she does" "Boy, that was a long time ago," my daughter says. "Yup," A long time ago," I say.

Prelude to Shadow Dancing

The Métis people originate from Eastern Canada (and other plain areas) at least as far back as the 1600s. We are a culture formed from the marriage between French traders and Native women: Ojibwa, Cree, and Salteaux. Later, Scottish traders married Native women from other tribes, and so the term Métis has also come to include the Aboriginals from these marriages.

The Métis are a unique culture with their own language, music, homes, and tools. The Métis language is called “Michif” which is a mix of French and Cree. Some of the Métis’ unique and distinguishing cultural identifiers include: the Red River Cart, which they invented for travel by horse: it had two large wheels and attached to the front of the horse; their cabins were a unique blend of log home and open, long-house style living; their music was unique fiddle music, often accompanied with guitar, drum, and spoons, guitar, and even mandolin. The dance which has been most associated with these people is the “Red River Jig.” I would like to add here that my mother was one of the most gifted singers and guitar and fiddle players in the area, and I think my grandmother was one of the best jiggers in the west. My grandmother also sewed the beautiful moccasins which the Métis were famous for, decorated with beaded flower patterns.

The Métis also created the “Red Sash” which was used for rope, for carrying supplies, and numerous other utilitarian and decorative purposes. What they are best known for, as Terry Amant says in his poem, is being a mediator of the new and the ancient ways, the representation that two races can come together and create a unique and wonderful race of people that loved hard, worked hard, always had a welcoming bed and meal for anyone who passed their way, were humble and yet had knowledge of two worlds that has yet been surpassed. I hope my story, “Shadow Dancing” reflects just a “shadow” of these wonderful people, of which I am a part, and of which I am only beginning to know.

Shadow Dancing

*...for the shadows still rise from the corners
to bow o'er the bench, and I?
I will curtsey and off we will prance,
for no matter how sober,
I still offer my hand for the dance.*

The Pilgrimage

It's mid August and there is winter in the wind here at Lac Ste. Anne, that sharp edge of chill that nips at the outer edges of your ear, the tip of your chin. *Manito Sakahigan*, my ancestors called it: *Spirit Lake*. It was called "Devils Lake" by early traders because of the violent storms that came on the lake without warning. Father Thibault established the first mission west of Winnipeg here in 1844, and renamed it after the patron Saint Anne. But the black soil that was once tilled to fine powder and packed in rows and hills of vegetable crops is now gray, clay-packed over the gravesite mounds. The thick emerald grass of the Alberta prairies that caressed the footpaths of a thriving Métis community is dry, brittle, and sways ceaselessly in the cool winds.

After thirty years, I have forgotten how winter in this striking and intimidating landscape can sneak past a sleeping autumn, steal summer in the middle of its flourish. I've been away so long, I feel as though it must have been a distant dream, fragile, evaporating like all who shared it with me, all who came before me. I make my way through the long, dry grass of the cemetery, the old stones, bits and pieces of dying flowers. Graves here go back to the late 1700s: my great-great-great grandparents, farmers, trappers, explorers, here before the priests, before the Gray Nuns.

But my grandparents, my mother, they were called “half-breeds” by the settlers who came much later to the area, and “despondents” by the early Canadian government. They didn’t know how whole, how complete the Métis were: a unique painting from the palettes of the Red Man and the White. I turn my head toward the lake, hear the wind pick up the cadence of drum and fiddle, carry it over the arcs of the headstones, between the old wooden crosses. A strong gust slams through the cemetery gate, slaps the nylon on my thin coat as I kneel between two graves and stroke the stone.

The names are fading: *Caroline Letendre, Adolphus Letendre*. A cross lies on its side between the graves, the wind having uprooted it, rain and time stripping the paint. I can barely make out the inscription: *Our Loving Parents*. I pick it up and lean it against a large rock. It must have been erected quite a while after Granny’s funeral. Grandpa had died in 1965 and Granny in 1970, a week after my mother died. My mother had just turned forty one. Granny could not face the loss of another child, not alone. She’d had thirteen children, but lost two when they were very young, one to the flu epidemic, one to the woodland prairie’s brutality. But it was captivating as well as cruel, this land, and the Métis people clung to it until they were swallowed by its black earth.

But my father was not Métis: he was a young widower with seven children, and so he didn’t stay around long after Mom died: he moved to the city, remarried. My three youngest siblings barely remember our biological mother. We had lost touch with her side of the family the way many Métis people lost touch with who they were.

After Canadian confederation in 1867, there was no place for the Métis: there were reservations for those people the new settlers called “pureblood Indian”; there were farms for the new “White” farmers, missions for some, who, like my grandparents, converted to Catholicism. There had been land grants called “scrip” allotted to some Métis who’d been

uprooted from their homes, but many were already destitute and sold their land grants for a fraction of the total worth. I was told that my grandfather sold his for alcohol. But I was also told that he was given the scrip in an effort to coerce him into giving up his place as a member of a treaty band. There are only two things I knew for sure about my grandfather: that his body was twisted, hands knotted more profoundly than the exposed roots of an oak, and that he sat quietly the nine years I knew him, much like the oak tree he resembled, fading into whatever background surrounded him.

But what else would happen to someone from a people tossed aside because they could not tuck neatly into someone else's idea of race? For the Métis, there had been no "us," no "other," no separation of the White Man and the Red Man for hundreds of years, until they found themselves separated by the lines that the new government had created. Some reservation treaty lines did separate brother from brother, as was the case for my grandfather, sister from sister, grandmother from granddaughter. It depended on who was living in allocated territory at the time a treaty was drawn up, and who accepted scrip. The culture of the Métis, their music, the Michif language, even their dress, once fractured, passed into obscurity. An identity rooted in the earth itself began to unravel like the bark from a dying tree.

I place one hand on the rise in the stone, the other on my chest, count the breaths, wait...I long for connection like a lost child, for the completeness of one breath, of mother, daughter, granddaughter and grandmother.

I have come, Granny. But I am empty.

The memories are fading. The red sash and fiddle of the Métis are gone; native drums echo through ancient graveyards, old chants and prayers reverberate off walls in empty log homes. Plastic flowers cover the place where wild roses and clover once grew. No one sings to our Creator, to the Mighty Geetchi Manitou, and the signs on the church walls at home mock praises

to our Mother Earth. And no one makes pemmican anymore. I hear the thump, thump of the mallets as we pounded the dried meat to powder. We packed it with dried berries or poured maple syrup and bacon grease over it, dipped bannock in it, then lay by Granny and Grandpa's pot-bellied stove. We would dream of the great fires of the gatherings and the pot latches, those memories of our ancestors that pulsed in our spirits.

I think of my mother buried in Blue Ridge, almost a hundred miles from her parents, buried in a place we moved from and never looked back on. Perhaps it would have been better to exhume Mom's body, bring her here to lay beside her parents, to come home to somewhere rather than be forgotten, the grave unattended for so many years. But she never wanted to be one of them, never wanted to be a "half-breed brat."

I thought about my mother's birth certificate, the one I had gotten from my sister in 2001: *Evelyn Leona Letendre, Father's Race: Indian, Mother's Race: Half-breed*. My birth certificate showed my mother's race as *French Canadian*. My great-grandparents had signed census forms indicating they were *Métis*, a race formed from the marriages between French traders and Native women beginning in the 1600s. But my aunts and uncles never knew they were *Métis* until most of them had passed away.

What happened in those years between my birth and my great-grandparents? How much ridicule did it take before my mother denied her heritage, her father, her mother? Or were the markers of her identity easily slipped off by the tallow of her own shame and embarrassment? Or something more instinctual, perhaps, like the inborn memory of a persecuted people? But she was a generation from them, a lifetime, a history removed, and isn't this sometimes the way of parent and child, of mother and daughter? God knows, I hated my mother often enough to deny not only her race, but her whole existence...at times.

I hate your guts!

When I die, don't you come near me you little bitch, or I'll haunt you the rest of your life!

The cold breeze kisses my cheek. I can feel the betrayal. Hers? Mine? I shiver, pull my collar tighter around my ears. I run my index finger over my grandmother's name.

I am here, Granny. I am my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter, and I am here.

I stroke her name again and again until the wind goes quiet, the sky darkens to coal black. The cracked faces in the ancient headstones are calling me, calling *daughter*, calling *granddaughter*. I close my eyes, lean against the blackness of the sky, listen to the whispers in the stone. The voices seem desperate, but I can't help them...not yet.

If I am daughter, who is my mother? If I am granddaughter, who are my grandmothers?

Only the stone speaks my name, only the stone to answer my questions.

I cannot scrape stone and give the shards to my daughters!

The voices I need to tell our stories—the story of courage and laughter, the story of a people, of a grandmother and a mother and a daughter—they have gone quiet. The music of my mother's guitar, the tap tap of my grandmother's Red River jig, they have gone quiet. The old stories, I have not yet told to my daughters. The new stories have not been written.

With what shall I write the new stories?

I listen to the cracked faces. I listen to the stone. I hear my grandmothers calling me...calling, calling in the still, dark air.

Come Granddaughter. Come No'shishim!

But I don't know you.

Come away, No'shishim, Come away. We will teach you...

Soon, Granny, soon Grandmothers. But I must go. I must go unbury my mother's spirit. I must bring her back here to you, back to the Métis people.

.....

Now, Granddaughter, Come now!

It is a hot summer, 1859. The wind slits the air like an angry badger, spits razor-sharp particles of sand at a thin, dark face. I can feel the sting as the wind slaps at the high, jagged cheekbones of my great-great grandmother, Madeline Gladu. Her mother clutches her hand, her spindly legs barely touch the earth. They rush to keep up with the rest of the family. It is the first sandstorm of the season and it is bearing down hard.

“Ateekapoo!” Madeline’s papá calls to her mother through the spinning sand. “Teeka, where are you? Christ, I can’t see a damn thing! “Maddy, my little one, hang on tight to your mamá,” he calls to great-grandmother, “Hang on, mapachit!

“Ota, Forgeron! We are over here. Keep going. I have the wee one.”

Madeline’s Papa and Grandpa are walking out in front of the rest of the family, shielding the others from the brunt of the storm. They carving a trail through the woodlands from the mission at Lac Ste. Anne to uninhabited lands further north, and are now several days journey into Rupert’s Land, the prairie lands west and south of Hudson’s Bay that are fed by its waterways. It’s at least another day’s journey to her uncle’s camp on the outskirts of a settlement at the bottom of the Peace River Valley. They have eaten only pemmican and bannock during the three-day trek across the northwestern territories, but when the rest of the family gather from more remote parts of the territory, they will bring supplies and food and these will be distributed to all of the band: cousins, aunties, uncles, grandparents. They will eat and celebrate, then the men will go on a hunt for moose and a search for the dwindling herds of buffalo; the women and children will pick and dry wild strawberries and gooseberries; Saskatoon berries and blueberries

will come later in the summer. They will plan the gathering places for the coming season. The thought of the food makes empty stomachs ache more.

My grandmother clings to her Mamá's scraped-leather skirt. Head down, bent to the wind, she plants her small feet into her mother's footsteps, her mother's constant warnings to be careful guiding her way,

"Pe'atak, Maddy! Step carefully."

As suddenly as it began, the storm abates, the air is left stagnant, hot, thick with small black flies. My grandmother picks up a willow branch and swipes at them, but they stick in the dust and sweat, bite her exposed flesh. I can smell the heat, feel dry prairie grass crunch underfoot, can feel the whip of a birch branch as it swipes at my grandmother's thin cheek, shoving its pungent odor up her nose. But she must keep moving, it is the only way she knows: the path forward, the footsteps in front of her, the slap of moccasin-covered feet on black earth, on prairie grass, mile after mile, the heartbeat of the Métis people. It pumps the Red blood with the White, the blood of the Cree, Salteaux, and Ojibwa women and their French husbands. A new path; their own path into places yet untouched...

I shake my head, touch my face where the vague shadows seem to linger. The wind is gone; the air smells thick, the way it does before a July thunderstorm. But it is late August, and too cold for thunderstorms. I tip my head, expectant. If moisture fell now, it would likely be snow. I have almost another hundred miles northwest to travel to reach Whitecourt. My thirty-year high school reunion would be held in the town of Mayerthorpe tomorrow, thirty miles back towards Lac. Ste. Anne. My husband and I would both need a good night's sleep. It had been almost a thousand mile drive up from Washington State. I pinch the bridge of my nose, rub the

back of my neck. As I rise, I make the sign of the cross, that ancient ritual of a people longing to belong.

I have to go now, Granny, I have to visit Mom. I'll come back, I promise.

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Crossroads

We turn off the highway at a deserted gas station almost a hundred miles from Lac Ste. Anne. There are no lights, no cars, nothing but a ten inch, weather-beaten sign on the side of the road to tell us where we are. It's gotten much darker, and the temperature on the car gauge says forty one degrees.

I step out into the flat blue-black of early evening and pull on my sweater, lean back against my husband's dull-green Chevy II. I'd forgotten how many stars there were in the sky here. I'd learned the constellations, not in the classroom, but by walking at night or sleeping out in the yard in the summer. We never had sleeping bags or pillows, just a wool blanket or two. We didn't care. My sister, Mo and I would lie awake for hours and quiz one another.

Bet you can't find Orion's Belt. I found the Seven Sisters before you did!

It made our childhood seem normal. But the reality was always creeping in around the edges of normal, always shattering the hopscotch playing or the star-gazing.

You girls get your goddamn asses back in here this fucken' minute! You did these damn dishes half-assed as usual. I told you to dump that son of a bitchen dishwasher and take out the slop bucket! And you had better move your asses if you know what's good for you!

I'll race you.

Okay. Loser gets the slop bucket!

I wasn't here just for my thirty-year class reunion. I wanted to visit my mother's gravesite: slip into town unnoticed, duck through the white archway of the cemetery gate, lay her favorite

flowers on the split stone, lay with her awhile, dream the dreams she couldn't. I wanted to, even planned on stopping in town on the way to the reunion. But now I hesitated here at the crossroad...as I always did at crossroads. But had I come too far to go back?

The crossroad here was once a truck stop on Highway 43, halfway between the farm town of Mayerthorpe and the town of Whitecourt, which was further up the highway towards Peace River, Dawson Creek, and eventually, the Yukon and Alaska. Taking off north of the truck stop was the only paved road to Blue Ridge, Alberta. It was the road to Blue Ridge if you knew that Blue Ridge existed; most people didn't. It was the home of less than two hundred people, a few dogs, and the occasional black bear, and it was my hometown. We called this truck-stop Cottonwood Corner; it was halfway between towns, halfway between lives, a place to pass for most. But it was our final destination every weekend. We never went any further until were bused to the high school in Mayerthorpe: fifteen minutes east by highway, forty-five through gravel and ruts and turns on back roads.

The Corner came alive every weekend with our childhood giggles, the whispers behind small hands into small ears, smiles that said we knew something that adults didn't, something we'd forgotten as we became adults. We came here to jump on the giant trampoline, the only one around for miles.

I can jump higher than you.

Oh yeah, betcha can't summersault.

Shit, somersaultin's easy. Any baby can do that!

Show 'er, Mo. You can do it!

We came with our nickels and dimes, when we had them, to buy soft ice-cream cones, to watch with joy, the twisting and turning of the ice-cream into the cones. We walked the four miles from town every Saturday so we could jump and run and yell. We came because it was the

only place where we could be children, where the ironing and the washing and the berry picking and the wood chopping could not find us, if only for a few hours.

Cottonwood Corner was quiet now, the laughter silenced under brittle grasses that invaded the cracks in the steps, that grew from the dust where the trampoline had stood. Peeled paint scattered over childhood whispers. I glance up the four-mile road into town and think about my mother, think about how she looked the last time I saw her, curled into a fetal position and asleep on her bed. She was wearing her green stretch pants and her red mohair sweater; I was going to wear that sweater, the only thing I had of hers, to the class reunion. I think about how she looked the last time I saw her dressed-up. She was going dancing with my father at the community hall, had on her best black slacks, her thick black hair pin-curled and combed over her shoulders, her cheeks powdered, her lips thick with red lipstick. She was only four feet, eleven inches, less than ninety pounds, but she was striking, beautiful, like a white poplar pressed against blue-black sky.

But my mother never wore her best black slacks after that night. That was years before she died. She and my father never went dancing again. She always asked—asked to go dancing, asked to go to the bar. *Please, Fern, just a cup of coffee, just for a while.* But my father was always too tired or too broke, or maybe he just didn't understand why she always wanted to go dancing or drinking.

What the hell you want all these goddamn kids for anyway? So you could leave 'em every goddamn night and to go the damn bar!

My mother's reaction would depend on how drunk she was or how many of her pills she'd taken. But mostly my parents would yell at one another for hours, my mother screaming at my father that he knew her faith wouldn't allow her to use birth control, my father yelling back that that was her goddamn problem then, not his, saying he was going to drag her ass to the hospital

for a hysterectomy soon anyway. At some point, my mother would throw something at him or hit him with something: she often would break a plate over his head or throw a glass at him, even stuck a knife in his leg once.

My mother was so ill during and after her first pregnancy, the doctors strongly advised her against having any more children. The irony of our constant bickering those last few years before she died was that I was her second child. But she would never do anything that went against her Catholic faith. Eventually, my uncle and my father did take her to the hospital for that hysterectomy: she was slung over my father's shoulder, pounding on his back and screaming. She had been to the hospital so many times, but I'd never seen her so still, so quiet, as she had been when she came home from the hospital after that hysterectomy. She was subsequently excommunicated from the church; she was allowed to attend, but not allowed to take the sacraments of Confession or Holy Communion. I have never been able to figure out why my mother could be forced into something like this; perhaps I've never wanted to.

It all became too much for both my father and my mother, being stuck in what could only be defined as the middle of nowhere without the hope of being anywhere else; it seemed there wasn't much to hope or dream about north of the fifty-fourth parallel. My father stopped sleeping with my mother, finding a spot on the end of the boy's bed, or taking the couch or a chair. My mother started drinking more, started taking more sleeping pills, more tranquilizers, started going to the bar alone, going often. Eventually, she lost touch with both dreams and reality.

My father met my stepmother at a dance at the Legion in the city of St. Albert. A year after that, they made a trip out to the old house in Blue Ridge. My biological mother's red silk dresses with black velvet polkadots, the ones she wore when she played with the Aments in their family band, were packed away with the red sweater and the black elastic pants. But the clothes and

other things had sat for a few years in the shed, exposed to the unpredictable elements of the plains. Some clothes had been shredded by mice needing a warm place to nest. The dresses, which had been in the shed since my parents' wedding, were saturated with mold and age. My stepmother picked up the damp boxes of clothes, scattering black and red particles of dust over the rotted floorboards of the shed. She had told me about the dresses years later, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes, and I had just stared at her. I felt nothing at the time, but hoped my dad did.

I push off the dull green Chevy II, squint into the windblown dust. I can almost see my mother in her dresses, strolling across the stage with her Gibson guitar hanging over her shoulder. She'd take her place at centerstage, wave to the crowds; her strong, sultry voice would captivate the audience. I can almost hear the songs...almost. But the wind is blowing, whistling like yesterday's fiddle, pounding in my ear like calloused fingers against the taut skin of a Sioux drum.

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1872. It's winter in the woodland prairie. A blizzard invades the tiny two-room cabin, sneaking past the gunny sacks stuffed into the cracks between the logs. I see someone jump as a sudden gust of wind slams open a cabin door, almost ripping it from its moose-hide hinges: it is my great-great grandmother Madeline again. She huddles near a cradle made of a hollowed out birch tree, shivers in a red and black wool blanket that all but buries her tiny body. She is seventeen. Her child, a son, is swallowed by a pile of cotton and burlap. A month premature, he is now sick, weak, vulnerable here in the northern territory. It is minus forty degrees. His mother kisses the fever, pushes the cradle. Tears smear a shadowy path down a soot-covered cheek.

Canada is but a few years old, and there are no doctors here in Rupert's Land in the Northwest Territories, and none would come to a half-breed boy in this weather, anyway. I feel the lump

that is in my grandmother's throat: it is the desperation of mother for her son, the fear of mother for her child. Her own grandmother and mother know the healing plants: the roots of the dandelion, the bitter meat of the white birch; they know which are for the fever, which for the rash. But they are not here: they are on the reservation near Fort Edmonton, forty miles away. She is angry with them, angry about having no doctor, angry with the wind for stealing what little warmth she could give her child.

She lifts her son to her face, kisses the fever, puts her ear on his rapidly beating heart: thump, thump...thud, thump, thump...thud. It pulses the rhythm of a Sioux drum: steady, strong. Her son is so small, copper-colored eyes too large in his delicate face. She kisses his nose, his cheeks, the eyelids of his copper eyes.

"Hush, hush, little one. Hush, ma'pichit." She cries, prays, the way the Gray Nuns taught, the way of her husband. She chants, the way of her Elders, the way of the Lakota and the Cree, the way of her mother's family. She holds a wooden rosary to his heart. She holds her grandmother's beads there also. There is no new way now; there is no ancient way; there is the way to healing, the way of the Creator.

Hey, hey, hey yah, hey yah. Hush little baby, don't you cry...

The Sioux drum beats on, like the distant pulse of the Athabasca River. She counts the beats, listens, counts again. She waits, like her mother, like her grandmothers did. She waits because that is the way of mother and child. In this, they were one: she, her mother and her grandmother, her husband's mother and grandmother. There is no Red, no White. The wind blows on, endless, like the winter in Rupert's Land, like the snow that imprisons fields and streams. It is endless, like the river, like the destitution of a people. She holds her baby to her heart, wills him to keep breathing...and waits.

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In The Darkness, Motel 6, Whitecourt, Alberta

Black. Midnight. Spiraling. The lake is calling; its fluted echoes caress my senses. Down. Down. Down. Down. I come to the edge of its swallowed secrets, waiting for the unveiling, peer over the damp green grasses onto the glassy surface. The darkness is suffocating me, and I can't see what reflects back at me. I call to the lake. It doesn't know me so it cannot answer. The grass freezes, snow obscures my trail back. And I drift and I lose my way and my way is lost to me...

I can feel her, my mother, she is the something that hovers at the edge of my consciousness. She sits by a river on the outskirts of town. She is lonely. I tell her, "Your father and mother are waiting by the lake." She tells me she doesn't care. She tells me she cannot go near the lake, the lake shows her things she cannot bear to see. She's looking for someone, looking for what she herself has hidden. She is both the hider and the seeker. I tell her about the call from the lake. She warns me to stay away. I tell her I am lost. She tells me she cannot be the one to find me and bring me home. I tell her that the lake will help me find my way back.

"Come with me to Spirit Lake. We can find the answers, you and I together" I say. "The lake will tell us who we are. Your mom and dad are there, they'll tell us, Mom."

"No, I've come too far" she says. "I won't go back. I am White. I am White, I am White! What do you want from me?" she yells. You're just like the rest. You never wanted to know who I was, so I buried that half-breed girl, buried her and never looked back."

The river rushes past her, doesn't acknowledge her. I see her searching the icy caps for a reflection. What does she hope to find? She shakes her head from side to side, coal black hair whips in the wind. Eyes the color of dark chocolate, liquid, burning, search my face. Does she want answers? I have none to give her.

"Stay away from the lake," she tells me.

"No, I never knew you. You could have given me the answers, could have told me who I was. Now I must go to the lake."

You'll find nothing there, stay away."

"I never knew you..."

I drift in and out of sleep, in and out of the nightmares, constantly checking the clock on the small bed stand in my hotel room. It's 4:45 a.m. when I finally give up trying to sleep. My t-shirt is twisted and pasted to my breasts. I throw back the covers that are strangling me, perch on the edge of the bed, and survey the room. Things sure hadn't changed here: out-dated electric radiators, worn-down green shag carpet, burnt orange bedspreads. There is a large black and white photograph of Whitecourt's downtown over the bed. It was dated 1954, the year of my birth. We hadn't made it to the downtown area yet, but by the looks of the motel, I doubted much had changed there, either.

The motel was clean enough for the price, but the old electric heat and the cramped quarters made sleeping nearly impossible. I slide open the small screened window, breathe deeply, and look out at the rows of hotels, motels, and side-of-the-road cafes. Tourism had come to Whitecourt, Alberta. Of the towns strung together along Highway 43, Whitecourt was the biggest, although that meant only a population of about three thousand. But it had always been the hub, the place to go, the gathering of people that my mother led me to believe were the upper echelon of society. I suppose she meant that they were the select few from the area who weren't like us: weren't poor or Indian. My mother lived in fear that people would discover she was both.

We came to Whitecourt mostly for laundry, and would be hauling up to six or more large garbage bags filled with dirty clothes. We'd had a wringer washer at home, but no running water, which meant we had to heat well water, and often had to break through layers of ice to

get enough water for laundry and for baths. Not bathed and dragging bag after bag of dirty laundry, we were easily signaled out as the “riffraff from Blue Ridge.”

Hey, Blue Ridge scum, why don't you don't you crawl back into your outhouse holes where you came from!

Oh yeah, well if Blue Ridge is the outhouse, Whitecourt's where the shit drops!

Leave 'em alone, Jane, they aint worth it.

They're worth my fist in their face.

Then what, you gonna take on the whole town. You'll be the one gettin' a beating...from Mom.

But we rarely had the money to go to Whitecourt or anywhere else outside of our own town where almost everyone was poor. We had traveled once to the city of Edmonton, a hundred and twenty miles to the south east, but that was for Grandpa's funeral: most of us had crammed into Mr. Benson's 1950s pick-up. I had curled up on the floor boards where I fell asleep to the hum of the engine; my older brother and one of my younger brothers rode in the pickup bed. My sister, Mo, had my baby brother on her lap. She always had one of the three youngest, always took care of them. I stayed on the floor boards, dreamed about what it'd be like if there was just my sister and me.

I stare out at the night sky which was lit up, not with the millions of stars we'd seen at Cottonwood, but with street lights, hotel lobby lights, and truckers passing by. I wonder about the people in their rooms, the people driving by, my classmates who would attend the reunion. Were they sitting at their windows as I was, thinking about something from long ago? I guess we all had our memories, our shadows of long since past. But lately, my memories didn't drift smoothly in and out of my consciousness, at least not since my auto accidents, not since the two head injuries I'd sustained. My memories often came in hesitant spurts. It was as though I

didn't want to remember, yet when I did, the memories stuck to my insides like half-eaten candy cane.

The smell of the rain as it splatters on the pavement awakens a primal urge to run barefoot over rough track; the sight of a cross along the highway transports me to the gravesides of friends and family I have lost over the years. A whisper behind someone's hand and I am filled with the shame of not being good enough. But the cry of a baby? That sends me back to the days my children were born, and I feel hopeful. And the memories often line up, the good with the bad, as though waiting on benches on the sidelines, waiting like wallflowers to be asked to dance. But you didn't get to choose which to ask to the dance floor, and which to leave on the benches. They were all there with you, a part of you, wherever you wandered off to, they all wanted to dance.

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1888. The air is hot, still, smells heavy with expectation. My grandmother is four years old. I feel the sweat that clings to her body. It is hot, salty, and rubs a raw path from her chin to her chest. Her moccasin-covered feet fill the same crusted footprints as her mother, her grandmother, worn now to the road forward, dried by the searing prairie winds. Granny's feet are barely discovered before she is set in the footpaths her parents and grandparents have carved out before her; she steps high, head bent to the task of filling first one deep print, then another. Her brother pushes ahead, finding his own way in the crusted mud and grass.

The sandstorm hits suddenly, as though shot from the belly of the hot, still air. It turns the newly dried soil to spinning and burning sand. Granny's brother bends his body to the blinding wind and dust, feet and hands waving wildly as though roped to the limbs of the tall trees bending in the wind. His small body is too light to push back the strong winds so his papá

reaches to grab the trails of his red sash. But is too late, and he is shoved to the ground like weightless sagebrush. As he is slammed to the ground, his hands skid across the dry, rough earth, skin peeling clean like scraped hide from a moose. I can smell the blood as the wads of dry grass and mud stick in the wound, hear his cries as they mingle with the roar of spinning earth and wind. Granny's steps are equally unsteady, and she is afraid; she stumbles to the nearest willow, throwing her arms and legs around the trunk as the deafening noise ties itself around her head.

Her mother yells into the wind, "Hold on Caroline, hold on tight!"

I can hear Granny's papa's sure, quiet steps as he comes to peel her from the willow. She turns her face into the softness of his deer-hide coat and weeps. I can hear his gentle words as he comforts his daughter, "Shush, shush, my girl. Quiet now, mapichit, quiet. Your papá is here." His words seep into the corners of my mind, fill the hollows where something was lost long ago.

A crack of thunder rouses me from sleep. I rub my back and knees, try to straighten in the hard-backed chair. It is still early morning, but the rising sun illuminates layers of coal black clouds as they somersault across the sky, hurtling lightning bolts in all direction. I stand and stroll to the desk, make a pot of coffee. I wait by the open window for the single serving to brew, inhale the musty odor of rain on pavement, feel the warm winds that accompany these violent but typical prairie thunderstorms, which usually dissipate as quickly as they come. I watch the water pool in an indent in the pavement below me. It would not be unusual for this storm, regardless of how long it stayed, to dump up to an inch before it moved on. In just a couple of hours I would be in Blue Ridge at my mother's gravesite, and hoped I would not have to fight the mud to get there. None of us had been back for over twenty years, so I wasn't sure

what to expect. I place my hand over my womb, touch the place where my mother and grandmother haunt me the most. I can feel the heat emanating there, the memory, the life pulsing,

The House in the Churchyard

I walk up the mud-caked hill towards the small, white Catholic Church. My cousin told me that the church was now for sale, and that the Catholic Diocese had been considering sending it to a museum the way Protestant one had been. In a town of two hundred people, we had few services—one hotel, two stores, and my auntie’s Bob-Inn café—but we had two churches: one for the Catholics and one for the Protestants.

I thought about the strangers who would enter through the carved double doors into the varnished pine interior. Would they still dip their fingers into the holy water, genuflect, make the sign of the cross, forehead, chest, left shoulder, right, kiss the tips of their fingers? Perhaps they would enter with cameras poised, ready to shoot close-ups of the antique, carved pews, the stained glass windows, the altar draped in white linen. As they paraded down the only isle of the hundred-year old church, would they see the imprints of my sisters and I, my brothers, my father as he knelt, arms draped around his seven children? Would they smell the freshly lined casket that held my mother, the linen mingled with the varnished pine?

There are scooped-out pieces of earth on the way up the hill that vaguely resembled old footprints. I walk slowly, step high, place one foot in the hollowed out pieces of earth, then the other. The dry mud cups my feet and I close, my eyes, imagine the footprints are my parents’ and my grandparents. But they had left no footprints here, no trails, no legacy. There hadn’t even been any goodbyes, really. My mother’s family had been here for years before her birth in

1929, and now the only evidence of their having been here was an old log house half swallowed by quack grass and reeds at the bottom of the hill down by the Athabasca River.

Dad had built our four-room house just a few feet from the church. It had no bathroom and only one bedroom for seven children, yet I longed to see it again, touch the walls that had always seemed too close, too packed with brothers and sisters, too belly bloated to the rafters with bad luck. I knew it had burned down shortly after we'd moved away, but at the top of the hill, I turn, half expecting to see it. Another house had been built in its place, but it was empty now, orange and white paint having bubbled on its surface and fallen in clumps on a half finished deck. The windows were cracked and smeared with dust and dampness.

The stand of Alberta spruce where we swung away the seemingly endless days of our childhood was cut to stumps, yarrow and dandelion living off the remains. A tall fence, the boards broken and toppling into one another, now lined the edge of the property. We'd never had a fence, and often sat on the wooden sidewalk outside of our property line with our feet dangling inside. My sister and I chewed on the ends of sweet grass and clover while we planned our futures, or we'd sat there and cried, leaning against one another as we mourned the death of pets or relatives.

In the back of the house, running perpendicular to the clothesline had been a garden: garnishes, mostly, like green onions and radishes, some heads of lettuce. The bigger garden that held the winter's vegetables was planted in a shared piece of land just outside of town. In the fall, we'd build chutes to put under the house and pour the freshly dug vegetables into it. It was the easiest way to fill the cellar for the winter. Work in the garden was hot, exhausting, yet when you stood to rub your back or neck, you could look out over the rows of hills you'd planted, hilled and harvested, and feel satisfied somehow. I wasn't much older than six or seven when I began to work alongside my mother and father for most of the summer, yet I can still

feel the velvet black dirt, just damp enough to stick together as it was pressed up against the new shoots...

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It's 1935. From over the rise of the blueberry-covered hill, I hear the rush of the Athabasca River, feel it course through my veins like the trickling of a June rain. The call of the moose and grizzly bear vibrate from deep within my memory. I can touch the first black soil turned from the Northwest Territory, feel it tingle as it sifts through my grandmother's fingers like fine silk, the sweet smell of black earth dug generations deep.

Granny's wooden rosary hangs on her hip, drags the soil as she digs, banging on the tin can where her seed potatoes are: click, swoosh, click, swoosh. She touches the beads, looks at the carved-out rows. What comes up in summer and fall will have to last the winter. She touches the Hail Marys, the Our Fathers.

My mother is just six years old; she follows her mother, hoeing the dirt in over the seed pieces. A French beret, too big for her small head, is tipped to one side, the possibilities of life still planted on her high cheekbones, the wink of an ebony eye as fresh as the early morning breeze. Her print skirt drags spider web patterns in the turned up soil. She is thin, wispy boned, but strong like the wind-carved side of a birch tree.

I close my eyes tighter, listen closer...washing over her lips are the first notes of many years of song, the melody that would later grow quiet and raspy was clear, the notes carrying up on the hot summer wind. I can smell the chamomile, taste the Saskatoon berries as they squirt sweet nectar down my throat, feel the grit of cherry-black under my finger nails as I scrape the berries from the bushes. And the gooseberries, winter green, hard-jellied casings, pop between my thumb and forefinger, the juice running a sticky path down my hand.

The Graveyard

Carnations? Was it carnations she liked or Mums? I wanted to remember which flowers were her favorite, put the right ones on her grave. I wanted to come here with my arms full of the right flowers, mind full of the right questions to ask. But they were questions she couldn't answer, had never wanted to answer anyway.

The name on the headstone is faded: *Evelyn Leona Armstrong*. I trace the grooves in the stone where her name should be. I run my index finger over and over it, wishing I had the paint to restore it so others would know she was here, wishing I could paint the truth under her name: *Father, Indian, Mother, Half-breed...Evelyn Leona Letendre Armstrong: Métis*.

The gravestone is split almost in two by the new tree roots bursting toward the surface like suffocating children, and the fissure is full of dead leaves. As I stare at the raised stone, the runoff from the top of the hill fills the cracks, carries the dead leaves toward the gravesites at the bottom.

The wind tugs at the hem of my coat. I shiver and turn, half expecting to see her, see her face like it is in the photograph of her when she was twenty one, before her marriage, before any of us were even an uncertain glimmer in her eye: her brown skin is smooth, soft, pretty, the corners of her mouth are turned up, her eyes are clear. She holds a guitar on her lap instead of a child, and watches the world from the stage, waves at the applauding audience, smiles at the people who have been waiting so long to see her.

It is before the fall, before her strange descent into the sadness that squeezed the life from her, before the approbation of the dark shadows that pursued her, the shadows that left her children battered, bruised, confused. I can almost see her. I trace the grooves again where her name used to be. Perhaps it was mums that were her favorite: soft, pretty, like her face...full

like the life she never had. The wisp of a dandelion seed top floats across my eyes and I grab at it...too late: the wind has pushed it beyond my grasp. I lay my hand over the crack in the stone, feel the life that pulses in the roots.

But what did we have anyway, Mom? What did we have that we can never get back? We had the clay-hardened mud to walk through, rigid footsteps to follow, footsteps we chose to follow, but all the while, we were afraid. We prayed for new horizons, but hoped for roads already traveled, footing sure, footpaths clear.

But it's all beyond our reach now, isn't it Mom. Just the seed pod spiraling before us, just the seed pods dancing in the wind.

I scoop the dirt near my mother's grave, let it drain from one hand to the other, smell the earth, the pungent nutrients that sprout life. The black earth is cool, wet, soft. We planted the seeds because that's all we had, and when the new shoots came up, we nurtured them, cared for them, brought new life into them, stored them away before the winter could steal them from us. When planting time came, the earth opened wide and welcomed the new seeds again: carrot, turnip, potato, sturdy plants that can withstand the early onslaught of winter. Bent, twisted, trampled, they would still make their way to the surface in late spring. Cold winds that nip at the bare skin could not reach the new growth snuggled close to the soil.

I touch the rich black soil, kiss the dampness, touch the warmth over my womb, touch the place where we grow. I close my eyes, stroke the stone, see the Redman and the White twist together again, this one, my mother, this one, her mother, this one is me, ebony hair and ivory skin, charcoal and cream. I go inward, far inward to the shadows, to the time of the White man with the Red. I go inward to dance with the shadows.

Granny calls again, the abrading echo of a desperate plea, the call of her mother for her daughter, the call of grandmothers for their granddaughters:

No'shishim, No'shishim! Grandchild! Grandchild!