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1. Susan, age eighteen months. Adoption photo from Montana Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. Courtesy of the author.

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I

I Wasn't Born; I Was Adopted

Billings, Montana, May 1974.

Two months ago I turned fifteen.

Now my father and I sit at the dining room table, watching the mists of rain drizzle against the pane of the large picture window. Our backyard is bordered by chain-link fencing. Pine trees stand sentry along the back edge, while rows of lilac bushes, alternating in purple and white, flank the yard's sides. Lilacs are my favorite flowers. I look forward to inhaling their pungent aroma, soft and sweet, carried on an evening's breeze. I look forward to their displays, floral cones that bend gently in their heft. But I, more often, look forward to their announcement of spring. It is quiet, this space between Dad and me, one of the few times we are able to sit in each other's company with relative ease. Dad's an alcoholic, prone to eruptions. I'm usually watchful, but today I'm relaxed. Unguarded. It just feels like a good day.

I stare outside and daydream, the dreams of a fifteen-year-old girl who misses her family. Against my wishes, a question sneaks out of my mouth and fills this tiny dining room with electricity, not the exciting kind but the scary kind. "What happened to my real parents?"

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Dad's head snaps around. The pupils of his brown eyes have become tiny dark orbs, piercing me with their sharp gaze. The tendon of his jaw dances rhythmically, and within an instant I know I have asked the wrong question. My adoption and the reasons for it have always been actively avoided—until this moment, when time stops, and silence, awkward and deafening, fills the gaps. I'd asked Dad this question only once before, when I was six. Then Dad's reply was "They died in a car accident. They were both killed." It was an easy answer, straightforward to a child's ear, and the information remained unchallenged. Dad must have heard the need in my voice to know more, because his reaction became angry silence that deadened further conversation.

This time, however, the silence is gone, but the anger is audible in Dad's answer: "What do you mean, your '*real* parents'?" I wince at the harshness of his voice as he emphasizes the word *real*. "*We* are your real parents. *We* raised you; *we* clothed you; *we* fed you; *we* educated you. You have a roof over your head because of *us*. Never forget that," he says, drilling the words home, quiet and measured. "*We* are your real parents."

His answer is concrete, the line drawn: the question is closed. But I am no longer a child who is content with easy answers, and now I resent him shutting me out. I pull air deep into my lungs, where it calms my nerves and brings my pulse under control. My life with him seems to be filled with land mines. This land mine, however, is particularly charged, and I work to deaden the explosion. "It's not that you aren't my parents," I say, my voice quiet, soothing, while my pulse beats like timpani in my ears. "But I'm talking about before. What happened to them?"

The eggshells beneath my feet are sharp and painful, and I don't know how far I'll get in finding out more about me, more about my life before. Dad might answer or he might shut down, and this conversation will be as if it had never happened. That's what I dread, because if that is the case, that door will never be opened again. So I sit across from him, hands in my lap, and wait patiently as he stares out the window. My own thoughts are thrown around as if in a storm. Perhaps he's ignoring me.

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Perhaps he's weighing his options. Perhaps he's forgotten the question altogether. But he casts a glance at me while he digs around in his sweater pocket for his familiar pipe and tobacco, and I take it as a positive sign. The odds are good that I'm going to get some kind of answer.

Dad has ritualized his pipe and tobacco; it is used to buy time. So I sit and watch while he packs the heavily grained cherry bowl with Sir Walter Raleigh, carefully tamping it down with his index finger until he is satisfied. Then, snapping a match beneath the dining room table, he brings the flame to the brown, wrinkled leaves and inhales deeply, so deep that his cheeks grow hollow and his face grows long, pulling until the embers burn fiery orange on their own. When he exhales, the smoke drifts in a cloud that dissipates throughout the room; the remainder curls out of his nostrils.

I used to be fascinated by the way his smoke curled, blue eddies that wound themselves around one another. I sought to produce the same effect the previous Christmas, when a friend and I sneaked out of her house and walked a half mile down the ice-laden road. We stopped near a copse of bushes, where I opened the pack of Salem menthols we'd purchased earlier at a nearby convenience store. I ran through the same ritual I'd seen my mom do and my dad do, before he switched to a pipe. Opening the wrapper, I unpeeled the small portion of the foil cover, carefully slapping the top of the pack against my palm, all performed in relative blindness; I'd never smoked before in my life. I extracted the smooth, white cylinder and placed it between my lips, where it felt foreign and plastic. Although there was no wind, I lit the match and cupped the flame, as I'd seen my parents do, and pulled in the smoke. It scalded my throat and assaulted my lungs, drowning them in a bluish haze. I coughed and tears ran, but still I tried to exhale the smoke through my nostrils, where it burned and singed my tender membranes. I tried smoking a few more times but gave up because it never got easier. Nothing was worth this much coolness.

But Dad's smoke from his pipe still captivates my attention, and I

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watch it swirl into itself, slow vortexes captured by invisible currents in the small dining room. After a few puffs he stares at the tabletop, his gaze unseeing, and sits quietly for many moments. When he looks up, he gives me a wry smile and shakes his head. Pensive, his voice becomes quiet, the menace gone. He sighs. "I wondered when this question was going to come up. I just didn't know what I was going to say." He pauses before he adds, "As you know, your parents died in a car accident."

My breath stops in my throat. The conversation I've most looked forward to, and dreaded, is actually happening. I work to keep my voice level, but it's difficult because adrenaline is taking over. "Where?"

"Near Missoula," he answers, returning his gaze to the window.

"How did it happen?"

"Drunk driving." He turns his head slightly and meets my eyes. "Happens all the time up there."

"Who was in the car?"

He gives me a blank look. I reframe the question: "Did I have brothers or sisters who were in the car when it happened?" What if I had siblings, but they weren't in the car? Suddenly my only-child status would change drastically! I hold my breath for his response. He pauses and looks out the window, sucking on his teeth while his brows furrow, calculating the amount of information he wants to share, the amount he wants me to know. "I don't know about brothers and sisters. I heard you had an uncle somewhere in Arizona. Phoenix, I think it was. But he was a drunk, a no-good bum. It's better you don't get a hold of him." He turns a warning gaze to me, his face set, his jaw hard. "He and his family would leech off of you for as long as you'd let them, and you have such a kind and generous heart, they'd realize they'd hit the mother lode."

Dad's description of Indians hangs in the air between us. He's not the only one who thinks this way. This perspective is held by so many people I know that it permeates my psyche: *that's how Indians are; everyone knows that*. Stories abound about people who've rented to a Native family. Within days there are thirteen relatives in the house; the place is trashed

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within a month. Or someone gets some money and suddenly the relatives show up, people who they've never seen before. Those stories are told by my classmates, my dad's friends, even in overheard conversations of strangers in restaurants. What is most shocking, however, is the fact that these people are so open about their bigotry; they are completely comfortable in these conversations, regardless of who might overhear them. My discomfort is palpable, but what can I do? I am isolated, an island in an angry white sea. Survival means silence; otherwise I know the anger will turn on me.

Dad stops talking, and it is my turn to stare out the window as I wonder what this uncle might look like. The yard fades away, and I see him, silhouetted against a saguaro cactus. He's a big guy, barrel-chested. He wears a black hat with a feather tucked in a beadwork band that encircles the crown. His black Western-style shirt has a pointed yoke and pearl snaps along the placket, and it is tucked into a pair of well-worn jeans, whose back pocket reveals a circular outline where his snuff can rests. I close my eyes for a moment and concentrate on his face, his round cheeks and dark skin; it is the same color as mine in the summer. But I can't see his eyes. They are hidden behind the dark-green lenses of a pair of aviator sunglasses. And just like every Indian I've ever seen in the movies, when he turns toward me he doesn't smile.

But I do. I like how this uncle looks.

I come out of my reverie and glance at Dad, who is still deep into his. "Where did you say they were buried, again?" I ask.

"Missoula," he answers.

My heart speeds up, and I lean forward. At least Missoula is in the same state. But I know if I show too much interest, too much emotion, this conversation will end. So I lean back in my chair and ask, in as much of an offhand tone as I can muster, "Where in Missoula?"

"I don't know," Dad says with a wave of his hand, irritation flooding his features, hardening his voice, turning his face to stone. I've pushed too far. So I say nothing while I sit and dig my nails into the palms of

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my hands, their pain invisible beneath the table. The silence stretches like taffy between us, interrupted only by the clock above Dad's head that ticks a steady cadence. Although it feels like hours, perhaps only five minutes pass before he finally sighs and shrugs. "One of the cemeteries in Missoula. I don't remember which one."

Adrenaline. It's a beginning, the first piece of the puzzle. The information he's just given to me churns, and I am now only half-aware that he's fished his Swiss Army knife from his jeans and is extracting the smallest blade. He scrapes it around the bowl of his pipe and drops the burned contents in a nearby ashtray. *A cemetery in Missoula. They would have records. There would be an obituary!*

When Dad is finished and our eyes meet, I watch his smile become tight, forced. "Enough of this macabre talk. It's in the past, and it needs to stay in the past." He stares at me for a sign of acknowledgment, and I, the people-pleaser, nod. But after that I think of little else. I suppose it could be called obsessing, wondering about these ghostly people who live at the edge of my consciousness, what they look like, their mannerisms, their way of talking, their way of being. Imagining them. I am desperate for them to take shape. How can I make that happen?

That night, in bed, I look out the window and stare through the branches of our front-yard tree, at the stars that dot a black sky, each one representing a new, unanswered question. How did the accident happen? Was anyone else in the car? Brothers or sisters? Was I in the car? If I was and they pulled me from the wreckage, did they take me to wherever they took kids to be adopted? And where was that? And if there were brothers and sisters, who survived, and where were they? Did the aunts and uncles take them? And if they had, why didn't they take me?

Adoption, by the very act itself, is defined by tragedy: death, the inability to be a parent (as in the case of my birth mother), and, in my case, the inability to be a whole and complete child. People typically don't want to discuss tragedy, including my mom. When I was younger, and couldn't

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get an answer from Dad, I'd ask Mom, who would deflect my questions, her discomfort at my curiosity visible as she waved her hand, dismissing the subject: "You're too young to ask questions like that," or, "You don't need to hear about the bad things that happen to people. You should hear only about happy things." These statements coded my mind to see adoption as a subject to be avoided. Wanting to please, I complied; I was silent. But as I would learn in years to come, an incestuous relationship lives between people pleasing and adoption.

My parents aren't the only ones uncomfortable with the questions. Friends, and even other adults, are uneasy when I bring up the subject. Typically, my interest, my forthrightness of discussion, is met with awkward silence or blank stares; both reactions essentially say that some events are better off unexamined. I interpret their silence as judgment: *Why isn't your family enough? Why can't you just be thankful for what you have?*

It's not that I'm not thankful; it's that I feel only half-full. The full half contains what I know: my memories, my sense of self, and how I fit in or don't fit in. The other half is divided. One portion is what people tell me: what kind of tribe I belong to or how I looked so sturdy but was so light when my mom first picked me up. The remaining portion is everything that had happened before, the things no one can tell me, because no one in my current life has any knowledge about them, whatsoever. And the older I get, the more aware of the emptiness I become.

When I go to friends' houses, I listen with rapt attention to the stories their parents tell, of when their darling little daughter took her first step at twelve months of age, falling so many times before she got to the couch, or when their son spit out the canned peas in horror at his first attempt at solid food. And they laugh, both parents and children, their eyes bright and animated. And although my smile is good-natured, it is pulled tight, so tight that my lips hurt. I hurt because I've never experienced these events, these stories, these bits and pieces of a lived memory informing me that I existed in peoples' realities before I was two years old. And then I wonder where this whole other family lives,

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this family who knew me before I was two, who knew things about me no one else knew.

My friends take their known pasts for granted. I, on the other hand, feel the absence of my past like a cold wind. Their life is an entire novel, whereas mine picks up on chapter 3, when the primary characters have already begun to take shape.

When I was six I had a pretend memory, a short clip of manufactured reality. In that memory both of my parents were Native. My mother's hair was long and black, and it tickled my face as she leaned over the gate of my crib and smiled. My father's hair was cropped short, his teeth white and straight against his brown skin. He didn't lean as far over.

I know exactly when and why I created this memory: to fit in with the lives of Christy and Jennifer, my two closest friends in first grade, who rode the same bus to school. We sat three to a seat, huddled together, protective of the secret space we created in our postures, and talked about how we came into the world—or, rather, how they did. I think someone asked where I was born, to which I probably replied, "I wasn't born; I was adopted." That's typically how those early conversations started. But I didn't stop there. Especially when the girls leaned forward, their eyes wide, waiting expectantly for me to continue. And the story came so easily in the spotlight I suddenly found myself in. I was a star.

"Why were you adopted?" Christy asked.

"My parents died in a car accident," I replied nonchalantly, as if I had told this story every day.

"Do you remember your parents?" That was Jennifer. She was almost breathless.

"Barely," I said, my voice low. It was almost like telling a ghost story. They leaned forward even more. "I have only one memory," I continued, but paused for effect and watched as they glanced at each other, ready for the secret. That's when I told the memory I had just constructed moments ago. I finally had a past, just not a real one. But at least I wasn't

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2. Susan, first grade. Mom was angry that no one combed my hair prior to the photo being taken. Courtesy of the author.

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left out. I smiled with their sharp intake of breath, throwing their hands over their mouths as if to keep in the secret. My story was exotic, and I became an instant celebrity.

Of course, the real story is that, because I was removed from my family when I was eighteen months old and adopted when I was two, I have no recollection of my parents. None. But six-year-olds can just make stuff up to fill in the blanks. Back then filling in the blanks wasn't called lying; it was called "imagination."

That same spring Dad's drinking had gone from a few times each day to nonstop, extending far into the early morning hours. This is when he felt most creative. How many mornings I would be awakened at three o'clock, when Dad, filled with a good dose or two of vodka (glasses, not shots), would rev up the saw in his workshop and cut deer antlers into little pieces of art that he called the "Laughing Man." The Laughing Man consisted of two forked antlers that mirrored each other. Vertical, with inverted curves, they formed the visage of a person, bending slightly at his torso, whose arms were raised into the air and whose legs were spread. He'd then cut a small piece of antler, shaving off the edges to form a head, which he'd attach at the upper fork. No other features or characteristics defined this being. There was a certain beauty in their simplicity.

One night I woke to the calcified odor of burned deer antler. After two hours of the noise and the smell, I stomped downstairs to the basement to angrily ask him to stop.

"Well, Suz!" Dad greeted me with a huge smile. "You're up late. What do you think?"

Dad had lined a few of the Laughing Men up on the workbench and was grinning as he looked from them to me. I was too annoyed to care what they looked like. I'd been awake for two hours, listening to the whine of his saw and smelling the stench of burned calcium.

I didn't say anything. Still grinning, he explained, "I decided they

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needed to be different colors, to represent the different races." And this was true—some were natural bone; others he'd painted with metallic bronze; still others were gold. There were no brown or black ones.

"Well, what do you think?" he pressed, weaving on his feet slightly.

"I think it's time you went to bed," I answered between taut lips, and went upstairs.

Dad had grown up in Cleveland, Ohio, in the Slovak section of town. His neighborhood and others in that city were highly contentious areas, whose boundaries fractured along ethnic lines. As a result, he was taught at an early age to distrust the Jews, hate the blacks (who, people whispered, were bringing down the housing prices), make fun of the Irish, and loathe the Italians. By five years of age I knew every ethnic slur and which group they belonged to. I would never use them because I knew they hurt.

"Kids used to call me Chinaman," Dad told me when I was in second grade. We were walking on a dusty road on the wildlife refuge, where silence reigned, bees buzzed, and grasshoppers leaped from Russian thistle to Russian thistle. I listened, but I was too young to see the pain on his face as he told the story. "They'd chant whenever I'd walk by, 'Chintzy, chintzy Chinaman, sitting on a fence, trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents.'"

"Why did they call you a Chinaman?"

"Because of my eyes; they're slanted. And I was darker than most of the other kids." Those "slanted" eyes were the remnants of the Mongol blood that had filtered down through the centuries throughout eastern Europe. When I studied him, he did appear Asian. For years I used to sing that chant when I was alone, trying to capture what it felt like to be one of the boys singing it, trying to feel how my dad might have felt hearing it. Though catchy, I always had an oily, bitter taste in my mouth afterward.

At fifteen I didn't understand the role the Laughing Men played for my dad. I didn't grasp that these representations were his tools for fixing

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his lifelong discomfort with race and nationality. I also didn't understand that these figures laughed when he couldn't. It would be years before I was able to comprehend that those men with their arms raised to heaven were where Dad's humanity lay.

Dad puts his passion toward gardening. Although he has a myriad of plants inside the house, philodendrons and ferns, he turns his attention to the outdoors. Sometimes I'll sit on the step and watch him spade the soil, mixing in fertilizer and peat moss until the dirt is dark and fine, dusting through his fingers. Today he unpacks the flowers from their small plastic black boxes and places them carefully in the prepared beds, brilliant purple petunias, green daisies that have not yet produced flower heads, and tall pink carnations. He is so careful as he lifts each from the dark, molded squares, cradling the roots, setting them in the soil, and then packing dirt gently around their base. He loves these small gifts of nature.

One day after school I'm greeted by cement yard art: a toddler that stands in the very center of his circular garden in the front yard. As I lean on the wrought-iron fence of the front stairs landing, the concrete girl is just a few feet away. Her face, angelically innocent, tilts upward, while she points a pudgy finger toward an object off in the distance. The other hand, fisted, is curled near her jaw, and her index finger curves toward her lower lip. Her face is defined by curiosity and wide eyes.

"I don't know why the hell your father bought that ugly thing," Mom says, disgust edging her voice as she pulls weeds around the pedestal. "It should be thrown in the garbage."

The following Saturday afternoon I see Dad kneeling by the statue. The watercolors he has taken from my bedroom sit nearby, and in his hand is a cheap, fine brush. He's painted her dress red and her curly hair yellow. Blue stains her eyes, and now he's working on her lips, a gentle pink, not unlike the carnations that now lay trampled from his drunken staggers. He croons to her while he paints, and I watch with suspicion. What exactly does this thing mean to him?

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He stands up to examine his handiwork, and he stabilizes himself by putting one hand on her head, carefully, gently. Then he sees me. "Oh, hey, Suz." When he turns to face her again, he wears a smile of total joy. "Isn't she the cutest damn thing? That smile? Always so happy? Always so curious?"

He pauses, his attention still captivated by the statue. "You know," he says, as if he's forgotten my presence, "I've always wanted a little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl. They're the cutest damned things, and now I have one."

Tears sting my eyes as I note his look of adoration. He's speaking about her as if this little cement girl will open that little bow-mouth of hers and tell him, in toddler language, what she is pointing at. It hurts to see that adoring gaze; it hurts to hear why I'm not good enough. Why I'll never be good enough. I finger my long black hair, pulled back into a sloppy ponytail, and stare at my brown arms, dark against Dad's white V-neck T-shirt that I'm wearing. They will only get darker as summer drags on. And I'm suddenly embarrassed that this is what I look like. No matter how hard I try I will never look like this statue; I will never see that adoring gaze focused on me. And then my throat closes, and I can't swallow, and the world blurs in front of my eyes, and I realize how much I hate him. What's worse, I realize I am beginning to hate myself.

My entire life I've been surrounded by people represented by that statue, people with blond hair, brown hair, red hair with flecks of gold, people with blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, but none of them have the same brown skin I do. I realize now what my brown skin represents to some in this town. It flags my difference and makes some people (far more than I feel comfortable admitting) see me as stupid or lazy. *Dangerous.* That's a word that sits on the edge of my consciousness, where its edge is as sharp as an oyster shell, cutting me if I hold it against my skin too long.

When I was little, in grade school, I just thought it was me—that I *was* lazy, *was* stupid. I didn't know why people stared at me longer than

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they stared at my friends, but I knew they did. My presence seemed to make people angry, their brows drawn together as they watched me and their words harsh from their mouths for the slightest infraction, like the time my Girl Scout leader screamed at me for accidently stepping into a mud puddle and dirtying my white anklets while petting the blond hair on my friend's head. If she could have hit me for being stupid, I had the feeling she would have. But these were just feelings, just the perceptions of a little girl who was unclear what signal had caused such displeasure. At the time I certainly had no idea that the signal was the color of my skin.

But now I know better. And I know there are only three other kids in my ninth-grade class of more than two hundred who resemble me. One of them is an Asian girl who, rumor has it, carries a switchblade. She is pointed out to me by my friend, a Viking princess with her nest of red hair and harsh green eyes, while she and I stand in the school yard after lunch. The Asian girl, slender and chic, leans with her back against the red brick of the school building, propped up on one leg while the sole of her booted foot rests against the wall. A black leather trench coat dusts her calves. Every lunch hour she is there, sunglasses hiding her eyes, her jaw sharp, her lips unsmiling, surrounded by thuggish boys and girls who look nothing like her. She rules this crowd: they laugh when she laughs; they don't talk to her unless she talks first. But they are always there. She's alluring and frightening at the same time, carrying so much power in that petite form. What I would give for that power, that sway to gather people around me for no other reason than to adore my presence. But I keep her at a distance. I won't be one of her lackeys.

There's also an Aleut boy who has just come to the school. One of my teachers tells me he's arrived from Alaska, but the teacher has no idea why he's here in town. He asks if I want to be introduced. I do! But the meeting is awkward because I can't stop staring, and I have no idea what to say. I just want to see someone who looks like me. But he looks more like the Asian girl, with his almond-shaped eyes, his unsmiling lips, and his harsh expression.

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Then there is Greg.

Greg is Crow, a tribal membership he is proud of, stating it at each and every opportunity. He sits behind me in math class and puts a lot of confusing thoughts in my head. Although he lives in town and not on the reservation, he's a real Indian. He looks like it, he talks like it, and he acts like it, swaggering arrogance combined with a sweet tongue. Although I find him attractive, I'm also leery; he's dangerous in that "lived experience" kind of way. Definitely not the kind of kid Dad wants me hanging with.

But in this class Greg and I are comrades-in-arms; we hate this class together. Him, because he'd rather be doing just about anything else than sitting still in school; me, because I just hate math, and my teacher is creepy. My teacher has placed me in the front row, between him and Greg, which is awkward because sometimes I see the teacher's eyes grazing my chest if I'm wearing a sweater or a dress with a scoop neckline or following the line of my legs as I cross them beneath my desk. When I catch him in the act, he doesn't bother to hide the half smile that plays on his face.

Our teacher moonlights to make up for the skimpy salary he is paid. In the evenings and on weekends he works at a film-developing kiosk that's set up in the Montgomery Ward parking lot. I see him one day while Mom and I are passing by in a car, but I turn away as he glances in my direction, hoping he won't recognize me. That would be embarrassing for both of us. Greg and I find his moonlighting funny, and we ridicule him, laughing conspiratorially behind cupped hands. Although I say Greg is the first real Indian I know, maybe he's just the first one to admit he's Indian. And when I admit I'm Indian, we're suddenly a club.

Like mine, Greg's hair is coarse and straight, except that it sticks out in all directions; it is only about two inches long. His face is brown and his skin is smooth. His nose is long and straight, supporting black-rimmed glasses that were popular in military photos from the 1960s. Although he seems like my height, five and a half feet, he's much taller; the desk

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hides his long, slender legs. All I see are his broad shoulders that fall into a skinny torso, with long arms in constant movement, folded on the desk, folded across his chest—never are they raised to answer a question. He dresses like a cowboy, with his plaid cotton or flannel shirts and worn jeans that fit loosely over an old pair of shitkicker cowboy boots, scuffed and soft, their stitching looping over his instep. But what I look forward to each day is his ready smile and quick way of talking.

One day Greg taps me on the shoulder and whispers, "You know that Ted Nugent song? 'Cat-Scratch Fever'? That's what I got last night." When I turn to look at him, he is leaning forward and nodding his head, his smile lazy and knowing.

I'm appalled yet curious. I narrow my eyes and ask, "What do you mean?"

"You know," he answers slowly, his smile growing broader. "When a guy has sex with a girl, and she digs her fingernails into his back? I got claw marks deep on my back last night. Man, do they hurt."

"You don't," I counter.

"I do." His black eyes look earnestly into mine. "You been with anybody?"

"No." The question embarrasses me, and my face grows hot. But I'm also skeptical of what he's telling me. I look at him for a long time—that smile, those eyes. He's lying. He has to be.

"You're missing out," he says with a grin as he shrugs his shoulders.

"Miss Devan, class is going on?" The math teacher's voice breaks into the conversation, and I turn around to his knowing smile. My face grows hot; I am embarrassed by so many things.

"You get per capita?" Greg asks one day when we are supposed to be working on math problems.

"Yeah."

"How much?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I get it when I turn eighteen."

Per capita are the payments the tribe pays out to each tribal member.

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It's the collective monies we get from grazing rights, timber rights, water rights, that kind of thing. It is essentially the benefits received from the treaties still being honored by the government. I used to think it was free money that the government gave us, a claim openly stated by adults, kids, teachers, strangers.

"They are not just giving you money," my mom said, her voice firm and unyielding when I repeated that statement to her. "That's not free. Those are your treaty rights; a lot of Indian people have died for those rights, and don't you ever forget that!"

"What are you going to do with it?" Greg asks, referring to my payments.

"Probably pay for college."

"My sister bought a brand-new Pontiac Firebird when she turned eighteen, blew it all in one lump sum." He sticks the eraser end of his pencil in his mouth and taps it against his teeth.

"What are you going to do with it?" I ask.

"Probably the same thing. Buy a car," he says with a slow half smile.

It is a middle-of-the-summer Sunday, and Mom and I are sitting in church. I'm only half listening to the reverend. The other half is thinking about my parents. *My real parents*, I think rebelliously. I stare out the window and watch the raindrops coalesce into small streams that dance down the glass, braiding their paths like the sand islands along a shallow river. I'm thinking about the cemetery where they are buried and imagining them side by side, beneath a tree, their graves marked with white gleaming headstones.

I could go there. I could take the Greyhound bus past Bozeman, past Butte, all the way to Missoula. I could watch the cottonwoods that lined the Yellowstone River slide by as I made my way back home, back to the place I was originally from. Maybe then, once I found them, they would feel real to me.

It is important that they feel real because being Indian, living in this white family in this white town, and going to school with these white

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kids reminds me not only how different I am but how I will never be one of them. If Greg could be proud of his Indianness, I reasoned, I could be proud of mine. But I would need to find my family to do that.

The following Saturday Dad and I are sitting on the front step. It is early in the day and the spot is cool, the cement still chilly from the previous night. The concrete toddler stands below us, her colors faded, still pointing to some distant object. In the background the sounds of National Public Radio drift through the screen door. My attention is caught by a story connected to the American Indian Movement, or AIM. The movement started in 1973, the previous year, when a lot of Native people occupied Wounded Knee, South Dakota. I don't know much about it because Dad usually turns off that kind of news when I'm around, but for some reason we continue to listen. Evidently activists involved in AIM are trying to start a chapter or something, maybe in Great Falls, Montana, and are meeting a lot of resistance from the townspeople. Probably from Montanans in general.

When the news story concludes, Dad looks at me and begins to laugh, his head shaking from side to side. I'm waiting for the joke. It arrives in staccato fashion. "What-in-the-hell-are-those-goddamn-crazy-drunken-war-whoops-up-to-now?"

I burn red. He continues to shake his head, but his laughter drifts into a confused smile, which is replaced with a snort as he looks off into the distance. "Yeah, well they're a few years too late to get in on the civil rights movement." He turns his head to look at me. "You know that's just what they're trying to do: get on the bandwagon, ride someone else's coattails. Hell, Black Power and the Black Panthers have already shook things up. There's no new news here for the Indians. As always, the Indians are late." He chuckles and adds, "But they're never on time to anything."

He pulls at the stem of his pipe, and he looks away. I look in the same direction he does, but I'm sure we're thinking about two different things. He's probably thinking about the news story. I'm thinking, *How am I going to keep from becoming a goddamn-crazy-drunken-war-whoop?*

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