

Indian Grandma

"im a quarter indian"

"okay Dad"

Even as a kid i knew this was a silly thing to claim. Indians lived outside. ate raw meat and painted their faces. Dad never did any of that. But he was very brown, always tan. Went barefoot everywhere and danced hopping on one foot. Grew up in a mysterious place called "The Canyon" where all 6 kids basically raised themselves with the help of the coyotes and maybe CPS. Grandma went out for wallpaper one day and just didn't come home. Grandpa was a Marine, Drill instructor at the base nearby. Legend was that Grandpa liked to go to the neighborhood roadhouse and pick fights with bikers- or hippies, depending on who was telling the story.

Dad did eat weird shit like pigs feet and undercooked chicken and the crawdads we caught in the creek across the street. Lots of stereotypes white people made up about indians could apply to my Dad. up to and including the drunkenness. But thats all stuff poor white people do too, isnt it?

Family lore goes something like this: Grandma Wallpaper's grandfather was named Raven. he was Blackfeet. Thats it.

There was nothing handed down from this Raven- no trinkets. no photos. no magic. no tears.

Like most white kids growing up in america, the history i was taught in school gave only passing service to the people who were here before. who were still here. We didn't look at them or talk about them or even see them- they were a sentence in a long chapter about Manifest Destiny, or Junipero Serra and his missions. Later i would learn about the Seminole War, Trail of Tears, and Wounded Knee - if learning means reading a passage in the US History text.

Growing up in SoCal, most of my friends were brown. spanish speakers who's parents came from Mexico. I ate menudo and arroz con pollo, watched chespirito and mi familia and Colors and La Bamba. Being the white kid in the group was weird: I got good grades, got beat up, learned some stuff about people who's families weren't like mine. My friends were Mexicans. or chicanos, or even bangers. Indigenous wasn't part of our vocabularies though; they weren't *Indians*.

Through all this, i didn't give any thought to my Indian Grandma. she didn't exist. Grandpa died when i was three. Grandma remarried and moved to arkansas with someone nobody liked; we didn't have a relationship. Years later, dad died. mom married someone nobody liked and moved to florida. There is a little box full of school photos and a couple of birth certificates. Poor white

people don't keep great records, i guess.

One of my aunts would bring up the Indian thing sometimes. She would go on about how this or that physical characteristic was from grandpa Raven. How it made her more spiritual. Sometimes she would talk about how she should contact the tribe; see what it would take to join. These conversations made me feel icky. like how my friends would tell me to stay away from their sisters because they were off-limits to gueros. I didn't care about that indian stuff. i wasn't indian. it just seemed stupid and fake and i was too punk for that shit anyway. Indians still didn't exist.

I aged many years in a few days. my children grew and became people. I tried to teach them how to be good. how to respect others and be kind to people who were not like them. how the world is messy, but they can still be kind. I thought about my own life and where i had made mistakes. Where i might have stood up for someone but failed to do so. Where i might have made a difference but instead kept my head down. where i was silent.

America got meaner. I watched as the last wild places on earth were burned up. feared for the future that was increasingly dark.

Why not see if there is any truth to the family lore? Lets see what's on FamilySearch! Somebody had already done the work for me; a murderous tribe of white settlers who are also obsessive recordkeepers. Here is my family tree, going back to the 18th century; how exciting!

Ireland. Scotland. Norway.

Canada. Iowa. Minnesota. New York. Michigan.

no reservations. no Indian Grandma. Raven? thats Ravine from Minnesota. But my ancestors had lots of opportunity to get to know the people they were supplanting, murdering, erasing. They were at Forty Fort. Coldwater. Iowa Territory. Ulen, Minnesota. Maybe they were decent people. maybe not. It doesnt matter- they were instruments of annihilation of a people and were silent. That one adopted daughter born in Iowa with no recorded parents could be Indigenous, i suppose. But she was erased before she even lived. Had a few babies and died young. She is gone.

Sometimes i try to figure out why the white people around me are so angry. Are they afraid of being themselves replaced? why should they care? They dont have a story beyond murder and consumption. Maybe they are envious of those who have a righteous cause. Maybe they are hungry for a past filled with legends and magic instead of exploitation and striving, a past where the joy lives in grandmothers who remember their grandmothers, who remember when the world was new. They haven't noticed that they have something to fight. They can fight money. They can fight the owners; the ones who put fences up around all the best land and raise no trespassing signs. They can fight against the exploiters and those who keep filling their heads with lies about the Other. They can organize for the benefit of our children and our wretched planet. They can fight against their own emptiness of spirit and the darkness that wants to swallow us.

They can fight and triumph and later sing songs about the great victory they won, and i think people who never were white would also sing with them.

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