

**UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2013, Second-Place Personal Narrative Winner**  
**By Emily Collis**  
**Shayla and I**

There she was on Facebook again; “*Missing my babies ☺*,” and beneath it, an inspirational quote. So much had changed from when we'd been friends. In just a few years, our lives had taken very different turns.

Shayla Sun had enrolled in my middle school in 2008, my grade eight year. It was a private school where we wore uniforms and were taught to meditate. She was the eleventh member of my class, and a late edition. I always thought Shayla was a pretty girl; I had joked with her once that her face was ‘round like the sun.’ Her hair was short, a thick black bob over her ears, and she was the tallest girl in the class. Shayla was shy and sweet, but she soon created an image of herself by dating someone she was hardly a match for, even though romantic relationships were against the school's rules. She brought bulging bags of tootsie roll candies with her to class every day, and handed them out to everyone who asked. I thought at first that she was trying to make friends and fit in as the new kid, but after it continued for several weeks, I realized that she was probably afraid that without these treats, that we had code-named ‘band-aids’ so we could sneak them in class, nobody would like her.

I never knew what kind of life Shayla lived outside school. At the time, it didn't matter to me. I simply saw her as a sweet girl who didn't have many friends and wanted to belong. Thinking back, I don't remember too much about her—now and again I'll come across a picture of her from a school dance, her fingers held up in a ‘peace’ sign. When our school shut down, I sent Shayla an e-mail, but never received a reply. I figured

she had moved or didn't check her mail. Either way, she faded from my memory and didn't return until a November evening three years later.

I was on my computer when a chat box popped up on Facebook. Magena Sun. I didn't know a Magena, but the picture looked a lot like Shayla, and the last name was the same.

*"Hi!"* The popup named Magena said. *"Remember me? My actual name is Shayla—Magena is my native name."*

*"Shayla Sun?"* I typed, just for conformation.

*"Yup, yup."*

*"Ohai!"*

Shayla asked how I was, I replied 'good', as usual, and I mentioned my e-mail to her four years ago. *"Don't think you ever got it,"* I added, my fingers clacking over the keyboard.

*"Lol prob lost in my mail, I haven't checked it like forever."* Shayla said she was doing well. She was living out in Kelowna with her family and asked if I was going to the school that had been put in place of our old one.

*"Naaah,"* I typed. *"I'm in a public school. Dwight wasn't my thing."* I considered it a cheap imitation of what my old school used to be. Not to mention I just couldn't get over the name.

*"Public school wasn't really my thing either,"* Shayla typed. *"I liked home schooling, I got things done quicker and whatnot—any other kind slowed me down."*

Home schooling made sense to me, especially if she lived out in the middle of nowhere as she claimed. *“My parents would want to strangle me if I was homeschooled,”* I clacked. *“Nooooo too self-motivated.”*

Shayla replied with something unexpected, *“Lmao my mom suggested it cuz I was pregnant and there wasn’t a high school in my hometown.”*

I gaped at my computer screen. *“You’re PREGNANT?”* I typed in capital letters. *“Since when?”* I couldn’t help but imagine the gawky thirteen year old girl bearing bags of tootise rolls, the shy sweetheart that I used to know. Motherhood didn’t quite match up, especially at her age. She had to be as old as I was, maybe sixteen or seventeen. I added in parenthesis, *“Sorry, I’m nosy. I haven’t even dated a boy yet.”*

Shayla must have found my shock amusing. *“Lol I WAS preg,”* she corrected. *“Well I’m preg again but my first born is gonna be 9 months on the 4th of Dec and the other baby is due April 17<sup>th</sup>.”*

I felt like I had to say something else. I didn’t want her to think I was judging her. *“They must be some pretty cute kids,”* I typed.

*“Yup,”* Shayla replied. *“First one is a boy. I don’t know about this baby, were making it a surprise.”*

I had to admit that was sweet. Even if accepting Shayla as a teenage mother was a challenge, I still had a soft spot for babies. I just hoped she could provide for them properly. What was the father like? Did he help her at all?

That night after dinner, I relayed the story to my mother. She pressed her lips together and shrugged. *“Well you know it’s part of their culture,”* she said. *“They like to have big families, and they usually start pretty young.”*

“I know, but... it’s just so weird to think that’s she’s got kids!”

I didn’t get in contact with Shayla again until February the next year where I learned that my old classmate had travelled to Bella Coola. *“I’m back home again!”* Shayla had proclaimed over Facebook. *“Thank God!”* I wondered why she seemed so relieved. Shayla told me she had lived in Bella Coola for a little while, but soon broke away because it wasn’t really a good town to live in. *“Some people are relatable but the rest are...bad,”* Shayla typed. *“Things got so bad there that I started drinking, smoking more and sadly started toking -.-.”*

Yet another surprise. Every time I spoke to my old classmate, she seemed to have something new and unsettling to say. I realized that the gap between us and how we each lived had grown quite vast over only a few years. The girl I once knew seemed all but entirely gone, replaced with someone else.

Perhaps it was cultural differences that resulted in my shock. Despite my interest and affection toward native Canadian culture, these days I can't help but feel a wedge of discomfort shoved between me and them. I'm all too aware of what my ancestors did to their ancestors, and though I probably think about it more than anyone else does, I still feel eternally guilty for the actions of someone I never met, in a time I didn't even exist. As a young, white, female with no ethnic background that resembles a minority, I often don't feel comfortable enough to voice my opinion; perhaps Shayla started having children at a young age because of her native heritage. I imagine too many people would frown and accuse me of being 'racially insensitive', so to spare myself the grief, I usually try to keep quiet about these particular matters.

I read recently in the Aboriginal Journal of Health that teenage pregnancies are considered acceptable even though there is still sometimes a negative stigma attached to it. The journal made an important observation; "Regardless of whether or not [...] young people perceived that their families would be upset if they were to become pregnant or cause a pregnancy, young people universally reported that their families or caregivers would welcome and help care for new children." To me, this is the most valuable approach to teenage pregnancies; to not necessarily encourage it, but also to offer a helping hand in raising the child so they might grow up happy and well cared for. Perhaps Shayla would agree with me, I don't know. But I *do* know that if I were in her place, I would want the support of the community, not their rejection and disdain.

Still today, Shayla is the only person I know of who is my age and had children. The rest of my friends watch Disney and play videogames. None of them have families in mind, not for a long while anyways. I'm in my second year of university, and though I someday want to have a family, I know I'm not ready. I think it takes bravery to face what Shayla has endured and come out of it with hope and optimism. I haven't heard from her since February of 2012, save for the occasional posts on Facebook. It looks like life is still a struggle for Shayla and her children, but she keeps her spirits up and hopes for a better future, as far as I can tell. In her photos, she looks tired, and the shadows under her eyes make her look older than me, even though we're both around nineteen by now. In any case, she's learning, and I am too. I know, and have known for many years, that everyone can live their life the way they chose. Though I may not completely understand it from my cultural perspective, I know that Shayla made her choices for a

reason. All I can do is wish her and her family the best, as my old classmate and I struggle through our separate paths of life.