

On the Verge Writing Contest 2021, First-Place Non-Fiction Winner

By Jenessa Joy Klukas

Identity

“You look like you should be from Moscow,” Corissa told me one day. It was in early June, and Corissa was the infant-toddler teacher at the daycare that I worked at. She was staring at me, her statement entirely unprovoked and unasked for. Turning to look at her I tried to mask my surprise by matching her intensity. “I’m sorry?”

“You look like you should be from Moscow,” Corissa repeated. “With your porcelain skin and all, you look like you’re from the mountains, the mountains of Moscow.” She assessed me up and down. I knew what she saw. Brown eyes, brown hair, round face, and skin that was olive-toned and freckled and didn’t quite know if it was supposed to be tan or just a weird form of light beige. I assessed her back. Blonde hair, makeup that was too dark, and too orange for her that didn’t match her neck. Pretty. Brown eyes.

I was Indigenous, of Metis and Xaxli’p descent. To add up the numbers I was around 60% Indigenous – which Corissa knew. I’d told her when she’d asked on several separate occasions, but she seemed quite infatuated with the fact that I *“looked white.”*

Corissa’s comments started as innocent – casual remarks that built up to daily belittling. “You’re so fair! I can’t believe you’re Indigenous!” Corissa was a sixteenth Indigenous. Every chance she could find she would remind me that she was also Indigenous which I didn’t question or remark on. “I’m so tan. Everyone asks me if I’m native in the summer!” She’d say. “But you? You’re so fair. You don’t look Indigenous!”

“Not all Indigenous people look the same you know,” I’d try to remind her gently. “There are different skin tones.”

“You’re just so fair,” she’d mock in reply to my explanation.

Corissa's belittling of my Indigeneity reminded me of high-school – unsettled and not feeling as if my Indigenous identity mattered. Grounding my roots in my ethnicity and accepting who I am, working on being culturally aware and finding my place as an Indigenous woman has been the hardest part of discovering myself. The phrase: “*I was too white for the natives but too native for the white*” was a phrase that settled inside me as I grew up. It felt like a phrase that I shouldn't say. It felt shameful and dark, and bad, and angry. Angry for being both white and native.

My birthmother was an Indigenous woman of the Xaxli'p First Nation which is located in Lillooet, BC on the Fraser River. My birthfather is of Metis descent. I was born on May 28th, 1996. My birthparents, both teenagers, placed me up for adoption – I was adopted on June 6th, 1996. I was adopted into was a loving German family. I moved to a Kitimat a small town in Northern BC surrounded by mountains and on the Douglas Channel. I lived there until I was nineteen.

Kitimat was and still is a very multicultural community, accepting and loving. Many members of the Haisla nation would invite me to Haisla events, I'd be referred to as *cousin*, and I would never feel different or set apart. When I struggled in my Indigenous identity I would struggle at home.

Home. It's supposed to be about safety, but family dynamics are complex and mixed and sometimes dark. My parents were accepting, and kind and tried their best to support me. “But you were practically raised white,” my mom would still comment.

Raised white?

I never understood how my mother could think I was ‘raised white’ when my Oma would say that when I was too loud that it was ‘the Indian in her.’ If I was ‘raised white’ why did I have to be told about how I ‘shouldn’t drink because you’ll become an alcoholic’? If I was ‘raised white’ why did my Uncle want to use me for my status card so he could fish on native land?

I was raised in a white family but that did not mean I was fully white, and that did not mean I was treated as white. I didn’t receive the dismissal that a white person would receive, something I realized before I was ten. The fact that I was both Caucasian and Native didn’t seem to matter. The 40% Caucasian part of me was rarely if ever, spoken off – perhaps because it was already accepted, and okay, and ‘normal’ for my German family. Nothing needed to be said. The Indigenous part, however, came up constantly, and almost always in a negative context.

As I grew older I felt a growing disconnect to who I thought I should be. I tried and tried, I reached and reached, but I couldn’t find a way to *feel* native. I was proud of being Indigenous. I was proud of my culture. I knew I felt loved and accepted into the Indigenous community but I somehow still felt disconnected. My nation was far away. I didn’t live on the res, and I didn’t have many who could understand.

When I tried to talk to my mom she would shrug and tell me that maybe one day we could go visit Lillooet. We never did. We drove by Lillooet once a year on our way to Abbotsford to visit my Aunt and we never stopped. I would stare longingly through the window as we passed. “That’s where my band is.” I would say each time. The announcement would make it feel more real.

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I feel most at home with my indigenous identity when I feel heard. It took years to settle into my skin as an Indigenous woman. I started telling my family I was uncomfortable with their assumptions on my Indigeneity and their remarks began to fade enough to let me grow more comfortable with myself. I started to tell people just because I 'didn't look native' didn't mean that I wasn't native and I stopped listening to their opinions. Slowly I learned to build a community – a community of people who would hear me and ground me in my Indigenous identity.

When I moved to a new university at twenty-two I was welcomed into the Native Students Union. I walked through the lounge door and I tried to do it confidently. "Hi!" A student leader greeted me. I almost jumped out of my skin. Was I going to get kicked out? Did he know? Was I not native enough? Suddenly it's high-school again, suddenly it's being scared of Corissa again, suddenly...suddenly...

"Hi!" I said. I smiled and he smiled back. He was taller than me, his hair was a little darker, but his skin tone was the same as mine.

"I'm Josh." He said.

"I'm Jenessa-Joy." We chatted and he asked me if I was new and what I was studying, and we talked about what he was studying as well.

"Where's your nation?" He said.

"Xaxli'p," I told him. "Lillooet." Josh walked over to the wall where a map of all the nations in BC hung.

"How do you spell it?" He smiled as he scanned the map carefully. I told him.

"It's near the Fraser River."

"Oh, there it is," Josh says, running his finger over the map overtop of the marker that

reads Xaxli'p.

“Yes, there.” My smile hurt my cheeks. I was acknowledged and I was seen, heard.

“That’s my nation.”

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Slowly I’ve come to realize what the phrase: “*I was too white for the natives but too native for the white,*” means to me. I’ve realized it’s the gluing together of pieces of what I’ve been feeling and what people have been doing to me. It’s people telling me I don’t look native enough or I don’t look white enough. It’s people telling me that I’ve been raised white. Its people questioning my indignity.

Slowly I work towards healing. One step at a time. I build my community strong and I allow myself to be heard.

I’m both Indigenous and Caucasian. I am primarily Indigenous with Dutch ancestry. I am not too native for the white or too white for the native, I am simply me.