

## INTRODUCTION

stopped, and not everyone who stopped stayed to be part of the book. But of the twenty-four who did I asked all kinds of questions. How did you get here? Who helped you? Can anyone be a feminist? How do you know you are a feminist? What about family? What about religion? Are you as much a feminist at home as in the world? Where do the personal and the political meet in your life?

This book is the song of their answers. It is exactly the book I wanted, and needed, to read—a composition for women in all their roles, through which we can discover interconnectedness, revel in it, grow from it, flaunt and celebrate it, and even call it feminism. By her willingness to tell who she is, what she values, and how she came to know herself as a feminist, each of the women you are about to meet has helped bring home to me the meaning and importance of feminism. I hope the same will be true for you.

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

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## Backing Out of Hell

Fay Blaney



As the teller of this story, I struggle with my voice and point of view. As an educated woman, I am adept at abstracting and critiquing my situation within the context of the cultural forces that shape me. As a First Nations woman, I also have a very traumatic history to recount. I firmly believe in the feminist principle that “the personal is political,” but by experience I know that it can be a double-edged sword: Yes, there is a freedom that comes from disclosing that I am a survivor of sexual abuse and family violence; but in the act of unloading this burden of shame, I contribute to the negative stereotype of my people as inferior.

As an adult student in Vancouver, I always felt uncomfortable with all the talk that my white classmates engaged in. It rattled me then, as it rattles me now, when young Aboriginal people speak so fast I can't understand them. As a child growing up with Homalco traditions I learned to respect quietness, to experience it as part of my spirituality. Adults would be amused by the chatter of children, knowing that with spiritual growth, there would no longer be a need to fill time with outward talk. But, while Homalco people place value upon inner harmony, based upon a comfort with our place in the universe, this trait usually gets interpreted by non-Aboriginals as submissive and mentally sluggish.

First Nations people have been studied and written about extensively by non-Aboriginal academics. At school, according to the course

outlines and readings, I was "the other." My propensity for silence seemed to confirm my classmates' view of that stereotype. When I would speak up in class, they would act surprised that "the little Indian girl" was capable of speech and intellectual activity. But they also became interested in the woman behind the stereotype and wanted to know how I was different. It is my hope that this story will reveal many of those differences and bring about understandings that will replace the stereotypes. In telling my story I am neither outsider nor truly insider, but a new voice rising to break the bonds of colonization.

My mother's life was horrendous from beginning to end. When she was born, her father rejected her because her hair and skin were too light. (His grandfather had been Scottish.) I cannot imagine a more violent human being. He beat most of his ten children, and especially his wife, whose pregnancies never stopped him. Some say that she died giving birth to his last child because of a beating she took. Having seen women murdered by their husbands, he knew there would be no consequences for his behaviour. After my grandmother's death, my mother took over the care of her younger siblings. Without her mother there to look out for her, her father viciously and repeatedly raped her. A priest stepped in and sent all but the baby away to Sechelt Indian Residential School. My mother went back to Church House (our reserve, situated on the mainland at the mouth of Bute Inlet, near Campbell River) after leaving the residential school at the age of sixteen. A year later, she married my father, also of Church House. One of the effects of Christianity and colonization was that families were pitted against one another, and mine was no exception.

My mother's family was on the outside because my great-grandmother, being a medicine woman, refused to conform. My father had the same temper as her father and left her with some scars and a permanent bruise above her eye. His family was opposed to their marriage and when he drowned five years later, he left my mother alone with four small children and some very hostile in-laws. Again completely powerless, my mother was repeatedly raped by her brother-in-law and any other man in the village who cared to. The wives, seeing her as competition, hated her and often beat her. In the summers, she used to supplement her income by picking berries in Washington state. A year after my father died, she went to pick berries and just never came home, leaving me—the oldest at age five—a younger brother and two sisters. In

escaping with her own life, she abandoned us to violence and sexual abuse at the hands of my father's family. I have always thought it a blessing that my baby sister died in a house fire the year after our mother left, because she was spared what we were not.

After losing my parents I lived with my great-grandparents in Surge Narrows. Granny—Emily Georgison of the Burrard Nation—taught me love, faith, and patience. Her two-room house floated on water in Surge Narrows, and although her original language was a different dialect of the Coast Salish Nation, she spoke my language, Homalco, fluently. In addition to teaching me how to work with fish, gather roots, medicines, berries, and other fruits and vegetables, Granny taught me the importance of communion with the spiritual universe. She would take me on long walks through the forest and the vast clam beds in Surge Narrows where we would sit on the rocks or gather whatever we had come for. In my child's mind, I thought that the Homalco homelands, with all its human and non-human nations, was the extent of the universe. We had no access to television, and due to the cost of batteries, radio time was strictly limited.

On our walks, Granny either talked at length about the stories, traditions, and teachings of our people, or read from the Bible. She spoke English fluently, but never taught me, so I never understood what she read from the Bible. Yet I fully understood the importance of prayer. Granny's faith and beliefs were so strong she was never dragged down with addictions or alcoholism. She too endured the violence and abuse, and often put my safety and well-being ahead of her own. I had only a couple of years with her, but she grounded me in my traditional identity and gave me a sense of personal dignity before she died when I was six.

Papa wanted to leave Surge Narrows after Granny died, so he took me with him to the home of his second daughter and her husband in the B.C. community of Haney. But Aunt Sally's violence was more than Papa could tolerate. After about five months in Haney, he pulled me out of school and we left Sally's home, moving to Vancouver with his youngest daughter, Eva. Some time after that, I was sent to Sechelt Residential School, where I remained for the next two years.

My third set of foster parents were my grand-uncle, Jimmie, and his wife Nora—Granny's youngest son and daughter-in-law. They were still living in Surge Narrows and this is where I went to live for the next five years. I became their slave, working from the moment I woke up until the time I dropped into bed: packing water, chopping and packing

wood, scrubbing clothes by hand. When I didn't work fast enough, or if I made a mistake, Jimmie would beat me. His punishments included whippings, punches, kicks, slaps, insults, threats, chokings, and twisting my arms and legs. I went to school, too, but often I wasn't really "present." During the winter, we made our living selling clams, and all night long I'd be out digging clams while the tides were good. During clam season, there was always drinking, and you could be sure that there would be a lengthy party after everyone got paid.

In hindsight, I now see that Nora and Jimmie struggled with the same contradictions that I do. They had many lengthy abstinences from alcohol, periods plagued with anxiety, only to "fall off the wagon." They railed against the severity of alcoholism on the reserve, and chose instead to live in Surge Narrows for most of their lives. They measured their worth by how many white friends they had, and yet when those white people came to our house we hid our smoked fish and bannock, as if it were shameful. And those white people, for their part, clutched their coats and other possessions, for fear that they might get dirty or stolen.

Whenever alcohol was about, I knew that sexual intercourse and beatings would follow. When I could see it coming I used to run to the outhouse and pray, staying there and asking—begging—Jesus or God or whoever to please not let this happen to me again. But it always did. I waited for my mother to come back and save me; my thoughts often turned to suicide. There were times when I wanted to jump into the ocean and die, thinking that I would find my father. Or I thought about walking into the forest and getting eaten by bears.

I took my first drink when I was twelve, under threat by my older cousin who literally forced me to take a drink of wine. I didn't like it at all, so I didn't drink for two more years. When I did, it was to have fun. The alcohol numbed the pain. It made me a different person from the one I usually was. With all my anger and hostility I felt I couldn't be anybody's friend, and I didn't know how to act socially or even to be around people. When I had a few drinks or if I smoked a few joints, I became happy. I had no idea what social drinking was. The moment I started to drink, the goal was to get drunk.

I ran away from Surge Narrows shortly before my fourteenth birthday, after which I attended six different high schools and lived in three boarding homes (similar to foster homes), two residential schools, and the homes of many relatives. Moving away from the isolation of Surge

Narrows proved to be a culture shock that required major readjustments. My exposure to television opened up new ideas and places that had never occurred to me before. While my fellow students chose typing or cooking as electives, my curiosity for more knowledge took me into creative writing and academic courses. I excelled in all types of mathematics and sciences. When I discovered that my intellectual abilities far exceeded the standard "special" programs that Aboriginal children were streamlined into, I saw how I could move a step or two beyond what my parents and grandparents had expected out of life. In fact, I was determined to do so. Through my persistence with the authorities at St. Mary's Residential School in Mission, I got myself transferred to the academic stream where I did just as well as, and often better than, the non-Aboriginal students.

But then my mother died of liver cirrhosis when I was seventeen, in grade eleven. She had come back into my life two years before. I had let her know how angry I was. I hated her for leaving me in an environment where she knew that I would be sexually abused and experience terrible violence. I hated her for breaking up the family, for the fact that I hadn't grown up with my brother and sister. Of course, she had a lot to be angry about too. By then she drank continuously, so when I got mad at her, the alcohol spoke back. She thought I was a selfish brat. Her death was very upsetting for me. I had only just met her again, and now I would never be able to tell her how much I loved her and how much I missed her and how badly I felt about all that had happened to her.

At school I was unable to hide my depression. The supervisors and nuns at the residential school took this as a cue to punish me for setting a bad example for the other girls. They'd send me to bed right after school, or deny me my supper or refuse to give me any time to myself. Not surprisingly, the depression got worse until one morning I got up at five, packed a few things, and went to Vancouver to see my boyfriend. He was from my reserve and had just run away from his boarding home, too. We were both almost eighteen. The main thing we did together was drink.

In Vancouver, despite the drinking, I waitressed and worked in the cannery and finished high school. I thought this would get me into waitressing courses at vocational school. But I was getting As in math and English and biology—in all my courses—which impressed my classmates and my teachers; they were saying that I should go to college. I thought this was a ludicrous idea—me, an Indian, at college! My

drinking was alcoholic by this time, but I went to college anyway and started along the road to a B.A. in history and an M.A. in education.

When I wasn't drunk I raged against the wounds and scars that marked me and filled me with a sense of impending doom. I had nightmares in which I was running for my life from Jimmie. Having once controlled every part of my body and spirit, Jimmie continued to taunt and threaten me in my dreams. I held my culture and heritage in complete contempt, equating a better life with being white. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, I attempted suicide eight times. But though I could try to escape my anguish and insecurity by drinking and smoking dope, they returned after each binge.

In 1979, during my second year in college, I got pregnant. I was twenty-two and still drinking heavily. In fact, I was drunk when I learned from the gynecologist that I was pregnant, and I just cried and cried. I had gone without food and other basic necessities because all of my money had gone to alcohol and drugs, and I knew that I could not care for myself, let alone another human being. The decision to have an abortion is one I still struggle with. Homalco tradition teaches generosity, particularly loyalty to family members, and terminating a pregnancy goes against that teaching. Even today, I wonder about that life. I don't know if it was a girl or a boy, but I have dreamed about a little boy. What if he had been born?

My first awakening came early in 1980 when I went to work for the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) in Vancouver. This was my first involvement in the First Nations political scene. Aboriginal child welfare was becoming a prominent issue and my job was to co-ordinate a child welfare study. This brought me to the front lines of the struggle to keep Native children in their own communities, and gradually opened my eyes and mind to the view that the word "genocide" is not too strong to describe the practice of removing them.

The three years I worked at UBCIC set my course towards a life committed to social justice. My greatest teacher was George Manuel, then UBCIC President and later first Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. George was an activist from the forties and fifties who had been instrumental in keeping the struggle of Native people alive. I had been raised to hold white people in high regard, without question. But George had no fear of whites. He would challenge non-Indian bureaucrats and politicians for their complicity in destroying Aboriginal heritage, self-sufficiency, and autonomy. And he really paid attention to the

well-being of us young employees, making sure we weren't just busy little beavers doing the work that had to be done—that we could make sense and meaning of this work. I was in awe of his radical vision for a traditional, sovereign system of governance and felt empowered by his every statement on child welfare, land claims, Aboriginal rights, and "Indian government." I began to recognize the racism written into legislation that permitted social workers to enter our communities and scoop our children as he taught us about the federal transfer payments to the provinces for each Status Indian child "in care." It had affected me growing up in the sixties and seventies, and it continues in the nineties.

At first I couldn't comprehend why we were fighting for Indian control of child welfare. My experience had told me that Indians were really rotten parents. We didn't deserve to have any children. After all, look what they'd done to me. I hated my Indian identity and wanted it gone. I thought the sooner we learned to pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and merge into mainstream society, the better off we would be.

Working at UBCIC under George Manuel, I too began to think in radical new ways. The source of my own racism towards Aboriginal people, including myself, became abundantly clear and gave personal meaning to the political phrase, "internalized racism." There was no doubt I had it. At the same time, I felt exhilarated by my new-found pride. I lived for those times when I was organizing workshops, writing articles, planning strategies, and travelling to meetings. Just speaking about the value and importance of holding on to my Native heritage was like breaking a taboo. As I learned to give voice to things I had spent a lifetime hiding, I lost some of my anger towards my family and the way they had raised me. I looked at how they had been victimized by a system whose express purpose was to wipe out their identity. Once I grasped the true meaning of colonization, I could not go on hating my family. At that time, I began to choose a course of action that would allow me to challenge the real oppressors.

Although UBCIC was giving meaning and purpose to my being, my personal time away from work was empty. With my new awareness I could see how my drinking and dope smoking played directly into the agenda of the colonizers. But altering my mood and numbing my emotions had become a way of life, and giving this up meant that I would have to face the personal demons I was running from. I knew that in my marriage I was reliving a lot of the humiliation and violence



that I had known as a child. I'd wake up some days with black eyes, once with a broken cheekbone. It was hard to sober up on my own, but I did it—I managed for three years to stay away from alcohol. But unfortunately, the nightmares persisted as I continued to smoke drugs in order to feel okay about myself.

The moment I decided to stop drugging was one of utter futility and anguish. With no more money to buy pot, I spent that sad morning taking inventory of my life. I saw myself as a little girl walking around with bruises and black eyes and asked myself why I couldn't put myself into the dreams and aspirations that George Manuel had brought alive in me.

Being sober and straight gave me time to face the cold hard facts of my childhood. Many of my mother's siblings were by then sober, and when I turned to them for help to stay off drugs, they took me out to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. But the incongruity of being a First Nations woman filled with rage against First Nations people was confounding and more than once stopped me in my tracks. In therapy, I learned how suppressing the secrets of incest and violence was the root of my self-destructive habits. Learning to speak about them made it possible to shed even more of my emotional baggage. As I healed, I read, and the book-learning provided a context not only for this emotional process and the spiritual experiences that followed, but also for what I had learned from George Manuel. I could see how removing my grandfather from his family to residential school in the early 1900s had destroyed his spirit and marked him in unspeakable ways. He in turn abused three generations of his own family, myself included.

But now, instead of focusing my anger on my family and the way they'd raised me, I started to realize how victimized they had been. I began feeling angry in a whole new way and in a different direction. I could see a reason to fight and how, in order to fight, I'd have to be sober. Since 1982 I *have* been sober, and I have studied extensively about hierarchy, patriarchy, oppression, imperialism, colonization, hegemony, cultural genocide, and Native spirituality, with the dual objectives of arming myself in mainstream vernacular and making meaning of my suffering and healing journey. It is so painful to do this, but as we say in A.A., "we get to heaven by backing out of hell."

Which brings me to feminism. My first exposure to the strength of women was during the Concerned Aboriginal Women's occupation of the Department of Indian Affairs' (DIA) regional office in the summer of

1982, a protest that began when five children died in a house fire. Over one hundred of us occupied the floor where the DIA regional director worked. In the eight days we occupied, some feminist groups showed their solidarity with us by holding candlelight vigils outside the building. Then in 1986, a close friend and co-worker introduced me to a group of women who were organizing a women's tour to Nicaragua, a trip and an experience I shall cherish forever. Shortly afterwards, I became involved in organizing a Latin American Women's Conference. Then, when I returned to university in 1987, I took women's studies and other classes with a feminist focus. Since that time, I have put a lot of energy into voicing an Aboriginal woman's perspective and advancing our issues in both my paid and unpaid work.

My university women's studies classes inspired in me a new understanding of the systems of domination. I found a great deal of merit in the principle that "the personal is political" that was applicable to my situation as an Aboriginal woman. When I arrived in the city, stereotypes about our promiscuity, laziness, drinking behaviour, and intelligence were taken for truth by most of the non-Aboriginal people I encountered. And being able to disclose the bitter legacy of colonization, the other side of the stereotype coin, was very empowering for me and for the Aboriginal people who heard me doing so. Another aspect of the support that I got from my women's studies classes was the compassion and understanding of the professors, usually sessional instructors. They understood and made allowances for the shortcomings of my secondary education and the crises—whether my own or those of my extended family—that kept interfering with my studies. Rather than dismiss me as incapable, they accepted and challenged my intellectual abilities.

My involvement with mainstream feminists is a tough balancing act, due to the racism on one front and sexism on the other. I strongly believe in the need for feminist perspectives and activism in the Aboriginal communities because of DIA-legislated sexism and the misogynist indoctrination of the residential school. But many Aboriginal people disagree with this. Based upon statements made by the leaders of Native organizations in the Charlottetown Accord debates, and the earlier discussions surrounding the elimination of sexist discrimination in the Indian Act, it is clear that they believe that there is no room for debate along gender lines. Other Native people who object to my feminist activities ask, "What are you doing with those white women?"

And feminist groups are not without racism. On numerous occasions,

the stereotyped beliefs of my feminist sisters have been borne out in their behaviour—being silenced or passed over or, worse, left out of critical meetings. Of the more blatant expressions of racism, one stands out. It was the time I made a committee report about the objections of Aboriginal women to my involvement. A Chilean woman, taking me for “one of us,” commented that the Aboriginal people in her country were just as bad. This is not ancient history; such incidents are occurring today.

I agree with those feminists who say that turbulence is a catalyst for bringing women into the feminist movement. It is certainly true in my case—not only the turbulence of abuse but also the turbulence of domestic life. As a heterosexual woman, I can never help noticing that men enjoy many privileges at the expense of women. Lip service is paid in my community to the importance of the extended family system. In the larger community the ideal of monogamous, life-long commitment persists. As feminists we strive towards another ideal, that of operating on a par with the men in our lives, whether the relationship is professional or domestic. In each of my own relationships (one legal and two common-law marriages) I have been caught in a quandary: Can I remain true to my cultural belief system regarding family *and* maintain an autonomous, dignified identity?

During both my pregnancies, the fathers of my children were sexually active with other women. In the first instance, my husband's affair with my best friend resulted in our divorce and the breakup of that friendship. We were in the process of negotiating our separation when at thirty weeks' gestation I had a set of seizures that put me into a coma for three days. My daughter was rescued by Cesarean after I was given phenobarb to stop the seizures. I was not expected to live, and if I did, I was expected to be a vegetable. When to everyone's surprise I did wake up, I was cross-eyed and saw multiples of everything due to optic nerve damage. Corena herself came into the world at three pounds three ounces. Because she spent her first month in an incubator, we never got to hold her, only to touch her awkwardly through small holes in the covered bassinet. Her father and I separated before her first birthday, leaving me a single working mother—one among the eighty-seven percent of Native mothers in the same situation. I left Corena with my cousin while I went to work each day at the Native Education Centre, knowing for certain that I would never have another child.

But I hadn't taken Glen into account. He was so wonderful in every

way that I fell in love with him. Corena immediately liked him as well, and began calling him Daddy of her own accord. When we discussed building a life together, naturally having a baby formed a part of that discussion. Despite my fears of being pregnant, I decided to go ahead with it, knowing that he would be there with me. I cannot adequately express how frightened I felt when he left me in the sixth month of our pregnancy. He went from the perfect caring and considerate husband to an addict out of control. He would persistently call and harass me. At this point my fear of abandonment was at its worst and instead of gaining weight I lost more as the stress took its toll. Much to my relief, he sobered up in the eighth month of my pregnancy and returned home.

I have almost always opted for keeping the family together during my domestic struggles. I wish this was strictly a noble principle adopted to challenge the harsh demographic reality of Native mothers. But I must admit that a large element of my need to remain coupled with abusive men originates with a fear of abandonment that began the day my mother didn't return from picking berries. The panic I have experienced each time a partner has left makes me try even harder to prove my worth. Glen has left me seven times in eight years and each time the panic has been intense and immobilizing. Yet each time, also, I have moved deeper into myself to discover just a little bit more—usually about my mother and the deep wound caused by her leaving me when I was five. With each experience of being abandoned, I have gained in strength, healing, and self-knowledge.

I see myself sitting and crying in a disheveled pile after Glen has once again threatened to leave. He is complaining about how busy I am, how I never apologize or take ownership in our fights and how I never forgive his infidelity and other mistakes he has made while out on binges. He says it is all my fault and that I am to blame for his leaving again. In this state, I am incapable of attending any of my meetings or other responsibilities. I resent this and feel worse. It is all so hopeless. I can't even save myself, let alone the world. I want to get my thesis done, but there is never any time. Every single waking moment is filled. In addition to parenting two children, working towards a Master of Arts degree, struggling to maintain my cultural identity, dealing with emotional scars, and working as a part-time college instructor, I volunteer my time to the Aboriginal Women's Action Network (AWAN) and represent our women in feminist groups, participate actively in the Native

sobriety movement at cultural and political gatherings, and draw attention to the First Nations presence in universities. I am spread too thin. I am drowning. The only thing that saves me is the drive to prevent this suffering from happening to my children. Usually I just brush back the tears and run off to my meeting, but this time I just can't. I have fallen into that dreaded black hole, the site of the worst self-loathing imaginable. I am again that unwanted orphan who has no value and is a burden to those into whose care she has fallen—someone who should never have been born.

As a child I prayed incessantly for intervention to stop the abuse. Yet no amount of prayer seemed to make a difference. As a consequence, I have spent much of my adult life in a kind of spiritual blackout, shunning the spirituality that is an integral part of my Aboriginal identity. I truly believed in a power greater than myself, but I also believed that power had it in for me. I was unlovable, even to the Creator.

My education has changed a lot in my life, yet one of its first effects was to alienate me from my spirituality and my own people, even the activists. I have sat in a talking circle with mounting discomfort as the merits of experience versus formal education are debated and I am openly criticized for being "too intellectual." They say I have forsaken my Aboriginal heritage, that I am a sell-out who has adopted western, bourgeois ideals. I have heard this in group therapy and from my family as well. I have my own nagging doubts about what I have sacrificed to achieve my goals. But I refuse to accept that the expanded vocabulary and perception that have come with my education defines the gap between myself and my own people.

It enrages me that other Native people make assumptions about my identity, especially when they assume that I have no spiritual beliefs. What they do not know is that I speak the traditional form of my language fluently and didn't learn English until I started school. Speaking Homalco taught me my place in the universe and in the Homalco tradition. I was one of the last of my people to go through some very rigorous puberty rites. Although I used my education to escape my Aboriginal identity, the book-learning that I have vested with so much life and energy has returned me to my culture; and the values and beliefs that my great-grandmother gave me now help me to cope with the effects of racism and colonization.

I insist upon presenting my Native spirituality as an important ele-

ment of my identity. Rather than the one supreme male being of our colonizers, I honour the spiritual value of "all my relations" including the non-human nations of the otter, the eagle, the deer, and the salmon. When Granny or Papa and I used to sit on a log on the beach, we would see an otter poking its head from the rocks. This would remind them of yet another story about the adventures of the otter people during transformation. I was taught that all living things had the power to transform. This is why some individuals possess certain abilities—a deer that transforms into a human would be a fast runner. Some remained in the human form and others preferred to go back to their animal form. With all the birds, fish, and animals that visited us on that beach, the one that consistently remained day after day, through all seasons, was the crane. Granny and Papa told me that the crane was in love with me and was waiting for me to grow up so that he could marry me. He was a dull grey colour with an extremely long neck, and *not* who I wanted to marry.

Ironically, it was Jimmie's death that returned me to my roots. I was able to go home to the reserve in 1995 to teach a life skills and cultural awareness program to young people from my own band. By then, Jimmie had been sober for five years. We spent hours in silence, allowing our spirits to meet, and hours talking and laughing about our ancestors. After the death of his wife, Nora, his drinking had gotten so bad that his health was in grave danger. He made the decision to return to our spiritual practice of cold water bathing, a ritual that I too had practiced during my puberty rites. During our visit, I think he knew it was his time to move to the spirit world. In my sharing about the hardship of my life, he told me that I shouldn't feel that I have to face it alone. He encouraged me to call on him for help, which I do quite regularly now. When the visit was over, he had given me the gift of belonging. Once again, I knew my place in the larger scheme of things, that I could call on the powers of the animal nations and they would work in harmony with me if I was doing what was right.

My relationships with Papa and with Jimmie have many loose ends and irreconcilable facts. How can I be angry with the abuses of my grandfather when he died a respected elder in our community? How can I accuse him when he protected me from the beatings of his son, Jimmie? How can I hate him when he devoted hours to telling me the stories of the families and traditions, transformers, animal nations, and our place in the world? I am able to make peace with Jimmie, a man

who stole my childhood, because to remain resentful is to allow the pain to consume me, and to allow the colonizers to shove me into oblivion. While I value my feminist work, I am still an Aboriginal woman to the core and also value my family and community, and more importantly, our survival as a people. If each Aboriginal person who was abused by a relative or friend in our communities went on hating our abusers, our communities would disintegrate. Some are indeed moving in that direction. The spiritual, sexual, emotional, physical, and mental abuse began with the clergy and other workers in residential school. I must constantly remind those who engage in victim-blaming where the dysfunction originates. For myself, I have come to peace with Jimmie and I miss him very terribly. In doing so, I am now open to remembering the positive things he gave me and taught me.

When I returned home in 1995 I began to reclaim my spiritual traditions. I was thirty-eight, and peeling away another layer of internalized racism allowed me to be more open to the spiritual and cultural practices of other Aboriginal peoples. In accepting my spiritual self once again I can pass these teachings on to my children. Although I do not remember all the stories that I heard as a child, I buy children's books about Native legends. Reading these to my children is the vehicle to discuss what happened to me and what I was taught.

I recently became a vice-president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) and was invited to return to Nicaragua as part of an international women's delegation to be an election observer in October 1996. I am still an active member of AWAN and AA. My children have never seen me intoxicated. I have never abandoned them, even in the most trying of times. In contrast to the conspicuous absence of birthday celebrations in my own childhood, their birthdays are always elaborate functions even when money is scarce. And their pleasures form part of my healing process because they get what I never got. When I volunteer during the federal and provincial elections, Corena and her brother Andrew Paull are involved in the foot canvass and know the leaders and candidates. When I went to Ottawa for the NAC annual general meeting, Corena came with me. The Aboriginal women's policy that I will be working on within the NAC will be informed by my desire for a better future for Corena and other Aboriginal girls like her. When I attend A.A. Native groups and walk what we call the "red road," my children join me and fit right in.

In writing this, I wonder how to bring feminism and my Aboriginal

world view into my teaching and my work with the NAC. Feminism brings together the private and the public spheres, and my Aboriginal philosophy teaches me to take a holistic rather than compartmentalized approach. To promote the family ties so important to Aboriginal culture and bring an end to family violence, it is essential that we provide healing resources not only for Aboriginal women but also for Aboriginal men.

When I went to my first national NAC conference, I met dozens of strong Native women who are working outside the male-dominated Aboriginal organizations while following the "red road." Just knowing they are there, trying to reconcile their Aboriginal world view and feminist ideals, takes away the feeling that I am working in a vacuum for a cause that no one cares about. But still, every day, I wonder. How can I remain true to my heritage while working within a mainstream feminist framework? How can I remain true to my feminist ideals while working within the Aboriginal community?