A Nice Story of Nohkom

LANA WHISKEYJACK

Les grands-mères jouent un rôle important dans notre société, malheureusement trop souvent, on néglige leurs légendes, parfois on ne les reconnaît même plus. Nohkom a été tout au long de ma vie et continue à être une source constante d’inspiration, de sollicitude et d’élan vers le pouvoir. Ce texte est ma façon à moi de célébrer sa sagesse, son humour et sa mémoire.

Dedicated to Nohkom Caroline Whiskeyjack

So many memories of Nohkom and me summers of stretched hide in the dancing trees rez dog licking my wounded knee galloping horses in storms they flee long walks behind that ol’ canvas tent passed a tall birch was crooked and bent Rusted t-ford to potbelly stove places we played, moments I love Tea and bannock by the kitchen window sitting by her side as she played bingo and oohhh those handgames late into the night drumming, laughing till the early morn light rolling hills, silver sage, painted sky picked purple berries in bacon grease they fry together as a child Nohkom and me traveling, visiting, being so free I’d be of support feed her horse named buckskin burnt down her smokehouse ‘Whawaa’ what a sin tried to help with a big load of laundry no more after that ol’ringer caught me but there’s no other place I’d rather be than by her side Nohkom and me.

Summer ended I started school with a smile she said “Education is your tool” then off we’d walk half a mile or so chewing gum, spitballs flying down the bus aisle speeding down narrow gravel roads all us rez kids sent to town-school by the loads wore hand-me-downs all stained and torn at lunch eat frybread and Indian popcorn and oohhh during those long lunch hours kids all aggressive full of imitated power a slap, a whack, all chanting “whiskeybottle” come home scratched, bruised, get a cuddle in her strong arms she’d whisper to me “Go back my girl, be strong, don’t flee don’t turn the other cheek, it’s respect you seek.” swelled with confidence, tough as teak came home next day bit battered but smiling after that there was no more bullying like there’s any other place I’d want to be than by her side Nohkom and me.

I grew up the way she planned strong, loving and independent then one day as if it were meant a phone call from a woman who was pregnant
she—a non-native—pleaded to me
“It’s his, your ex, won’t you let him be
he still calls your name deep in his sleep
his heart’s not yours but mine to keep
so take back your love medicine
that is what he said you’d do to win”
I gasped then laughed in disbelief
being blamed for something I’d never weave
I called Nohkom with tears in my eyes
cried and muttered “That man’s full of lies!”
then she told me like I already knew
lovingly consoling me like she experienced a few
“The only medicine we have is between our legs.”
an instinctive wisdom a life-giving force begs
enlightened by knowledge forever there
mistahi respect, love, wisdom to share
worked hard like she did clearing fields
studying, writing, creating, those are my shields
and like there’s any other place I’d rather be
than by her side
Nohkom and me.

Finished school, worked, fell in love
our nations capital is where we moved
walked and talked in unrecognized territory
humour like hers provokes social foray
so far from home an emptiness reappears
then moments of gathered memories soothe my fears
visions of healthy relations, animate landscapes
veiled ancient teachings my wondrous gaze
swiftly I return to my many colourful places
of mountains, pow wows, medicines, and old faces
still haunted, challenged as restlessness consumes
the wisdom and spirit of Nohkom blooms
“Kiyam, don’t worry, do your best and share”
powerful words of hers remind me to care
gift-giving of paintings, buffalo stew and laughter
ways I offer love—my desired character
an earthy role strengthens my intrinsic ember
sweetgrass smolder carries thanksgiving of her
her rhythmic visits of songs, stories and humour
teaches us women to grow strong and together
sometimes we listen many times we don’t
eventually we learn to balance as others won’t
but we’re here for each other together as one
collective roles our children’s continuum
and there’s no other place I’d rather be
than by my family’s side
Hiy-hiy to Nohkom and me.

The artwork on the previous page is a casting of my seven-month pregnant belly. The image within the casting is of my nohkom Caroline. I transferred my favourite picture of her so that her heart is centred on my belly button. Lana Whiskeyjack is a Nehiyaw (Cree) from Saddle Lake First Nation, Alberta. She is currently living in Alberta.