

TRUCK STOP

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Every American Indian person – repeat, every American Indian person – is related to or knows someone or is someone who has been adopted out of or removed from their reservation family. A significant percentage of each recent generation of American Indian people has grown up among strangers, either adopted by non-reservation families or force-fed through a state foster care system. This is, of course, one of the fundamental issues Congress hoped to address when it enacted the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. This fictional narrative is my take on what it means for an Indian person to lose their family – and to regain it much, much later.

George glanced around the restaurant. It was cavernous, with the tables empty and set far apart from each other. Otherwise, it looked like any old diner, except that it still had telephones without dialers in the booths. He was tempted to fiddle with the phone while he waited, to see who it would call if he picked it up. He remembered eating with Stella at a truck stop once, when they were going together. He sucked in his gut a little on reflex, knowing that what he was about to eat wasn't going anywhere for a while. Thirty-eight. Christ. George figured the sole thing that kept his fat, aging, weak body alive was that he stopped smoking before it could take hold. With all the traveling, the eating processed fatty foods, the high stress levels, the extra forty pounds he carried around his waist, lack of exercise, loneliness – he wouldn't last beyond fifty. Was that self-pity? Was it self-pity that drove him to find his daughter? Is that what he was doing in Grand Forks, North Dakota, watching the snow blow like a white sheet over the I-29 highway embankment? He looked around the diner again to see if she had arrived yet, if it was her this time. He wasn't the only patron; there were two old women at the other side of the restaurant, smoking and drinking coffee while they talked. He wanted to know if they were talking about him and assumed they were, the old Peshawbestown instincts dying hard. He remembered Stella offering him a cigarette in another diner long ago. He coughed and knew in that instant he'd die coughing if he kept smoking.

Stella.

George knew Stella growing up in Traverse City. She was ten, fifteen years older. He never knew how old she was, but she may have even babysat him a time or two. She acted young and came to all the young people's parties in Traverse and Peshawbestown. Maybe she seemed young because she didn't have kids and she was the youngest in her family. All her sisters were married, divorced, driving kids around, looking harried, but she always had a smile on her face. She even exercised a little, a decade before it was fashionable for

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'Nishinaabes' to hit the gym. George knew Stella from around, but they weren't friends, just acquaintances from P-Town, each with great-aunties or a grandmother living by the bay. They ran with crews that overlapped a little, so they'd visit at someone's bonfire in the woods, then maybe see each other at church the next day.

At the party his cousins threw when George got his letter of acceptance from Michigan, that's where it happened. Everyone was drinking to George, passing around cans of Old Mil and Bud Light, laughing and giggling and picking fights to hammer out later. George already had a girlfriend, one of the other great educational hopes for the community, but they didn't like each other. They came together out of deference to everyone's expectations – they were the only smart people, so they had to go together. Stacy liked country music, Garth Brooks-type pop, but George preferred Bob Seger's Hollywood nights, with a smidgen of the Stooges thrown in. He was born and bred to move to Ann Arbor and walk in the footsteps of his music idols. Stella was the one who put the rock'n'roll on the stereo that night. It was Patti Smith's *Horses*. And no one was listening to Patti Smith in northwest lower Michigan in December 1985 except Stella and George.

They dated for a few months, trying to see how long they could keep it quiet. But Stella's sister saw her in mid-January coming out of the c-store just outside of Suttons Bay with a package of tobacco, some papers, and a deluxe box of rubbers. No one ever acknowledged to their faces they suspected or knew, but there was no such thing as a false rumor in P-Town, or any small town. Maybe their peers thought they were great together, young George and old Stella, a controversy, a forbidden love story with a twist of prurient interest, but his mom and gram wouldn't stop the complaining about her. Stella, the one who knew better, the cradle-robber, took it the hardest. Some people were talking about calling the cops, not meaning it because, hell, the cops already knew. They weren't stupid.

"Maybe I just needed a reason to leave this place," she said to him the last time they were together.

George was too young to understand. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to be one of those Indians that never leaves, that never gets out and takes a look around the world. All my uncles went to war. They saw the world. I don't want to be like those women around here that never did anything."

George looked down, trying to understand.

"Look me up when you're rich and famous."

George let her go after that last night. He wouldn't know about his daughter for decades. Stella didn't tell him which night their daughter was conceived, but he liked to think it was that last night. He didn't keep his promise to look Stella up after graduation, even when he graduated from law school, but he heard little things about her when he went home visiting. No one ever said anything to him about her outright, but he thought they'd raise their voices a little when they talked about her. She was in Tucson for a while and then she married a Hupa guy. No, it was a Ho-Chunk guy, one of those big Winnebagos. Or she was a waitress in Albuquerque at one of the Indian bars. Then she was married to a lawyer in Minneapolis. Nothing George heard made any sense; he wanted to

ignore the news, but he couldn't stop from hanging on every word. He knew Stella called her grandmother often, but she wasn't talking about her favorite granddaughter to anyone. All that time, George knew better than to ask.

Now, sitting there at the diner, George calculated that it had been a year and a half or so since Stella called him up out of the blue. "Got your phone number off the law firm website," she said. She was calling from Eureka, California.

George told her he always hoped she would find him.

"Bullshit," she said, a little harsher than she meant. "Best thing I ever did for you was hit the road."

George couldn't disagree. "Where'd you go?"

"Forget that. We have to talk about your daughter."

Since Stella wouldn't say anything over the phone, George took the next flight from D.C. with 37,500 of his frequent flyer miles. When he reached the Arcata-Eureka airport, he found out she was too sick to pick him up at the airport. Stomach cancer, already spread to the lymph nodes.

Stella gave birth in late August 1986, a few days before George moved into East Quad in Ann Arbor. She was at the IHS hospital in Albuquerque, and she was broke. She hadn't eaten in a couple of days. The baby was malnourished and sick – and so was the momma. The doctors and nurses took the little one away and Stella didn't see her for a week. After they discharged Stella, she started drinking.

"I want you to know I wasn't drinking at all after I found out I was pregnant," she said with a fire in her eyes that made George want to believe her.

Stella hooked up with a big Tewa guy who had just dropped out of college. He had sad eyes, a round face, messy hair, and he liked the way she looked in a miniskirt. He had a nice place all to himself, too. He was a good father for a few years, but wasn't someone who could take long-term responsibility for a sickly Indian baby.

"They came for our daughter right after that," she said. "Our daughter," she repeated. "I'm not used to saying that. She was five."

Stella didn't know where they took her. "I think you should find her. I named her after my grandmother, but her adoptive parents would have changed it." George said it wouldn't make sense to change the name of a five-year-old, but Stella told him, like she used to, to shut up and quit arguing with her. She died a month later, after George had already met one of the false candidates.

He called them the false candidates in an attempt to make it sound like he was certain they weren't his children, but he never really was sure. It disturbed him how many Indian babies disappeared into white society without a trace. The Indian Child Welfare Act was a joke. He took Stella's charge with a degree of seriousness he never gave to his job with Berkman, Deloria, Goldman, and Petoskey. He followed every lead he could and used up his 250,000 frequent flyer miles in the first four months. He met five Indian women in five different states. There was at least one thing about their stories that wouldn't jive, such as the state of adoption (Nebraska instead of New Mexico, for instance) or the name on the birth certificate. And George was a stickler for paperwork. But what mattered, he knew, was what he saw when he looked into their eyes. And he didn't see anything in these young women. Nothing he recognized. He

wondered if he had been away from Peshawbestown and his family for so long, he couldn't recognize a 'Nishinaabe if he saw one.

Five false candidates so far.

George was on his second cup of coffee, thinking he was being stood up, when his sixth candidate walked in. She was bundled in every conceivable layer of warm clothing and he couldn't see her face. She was tall and carried a backpack, an old Army surplus. She stomped her boots on the rug and shook off the snow as best as she could. He was the only one sitting alone, so she looked right at him for a moment before beginning to unwrap. She took off her scarves, hat, and gloves, and walked over to his table.

George knew that this young woman was his daughter in Joan Didion's ordinary instant. She looked like his own mother did in a picture he kept, one where his mom is laughing outside the cider mill in Antrim County. His mom at 22 looked like this woman. Long, black, straight hair. Round face, like the moon. Narrow eyes that made people mistake her for Asian when she was younger. And tall. Mamagona women tended to grow like weeds.

"George Mamagona?" she said, pronouncing his last name like they used to say his grandmother's name down at the Vets, with the "ma'am" at the beginning instead of the "mom."

He was unable to say anything. He swallowed hard and motioned for the woman to sit down. She still wore a massive winter coat and it took some doing to get it off. He heard the static crackle as the coat released her hair and cringed. He knew the feeling and smiled. The god-awful static electricity of dry winters would be their first commonality.

Since he didn't say anything, she stuck out here hand over the table and said, "Lisa Hyde." They zapped each other as they touched.

George had emailed Lisa a few weeks earlier on her UND student account. He worried about sounding like a stalker or a predator when he first contacted the candidates. Lisa didn't respond for a week. George was about to call information when his computer bleeped with her response. This Lisa had talked it over with her friends and family. She'd be willing to meet him on the off chance he was the real deal. There was a truck stop on the west side of I-29 in Grand Forks. She said the food there was good and no one from the university ate over there. It wouldn't be suspicious. It would be neutral and safe. It was quiet.

Lisa was just a little older than George was when he dated Stella and became a father.

"You don't look like your picture," she said. She kept a poker face, making clear her mistrust, puffing up her worldly experience.

It was true. "I've gained a little weight since that picture was taken," he said. "And a few gray hairs, I suppose." He was 26 when they took the picture for the firm website. His suits hadn't gone out of style yet, he hoped.

"So what makes you think you're my father?"

Your eyes, squinting, like my mother when she's angry. And your hair, the exact shade as my mother's hair before I was born.

"Paperwork," he said, saying the wrong thing like a cold-hearted bastard and wondering how he would recover.

“Oh, yeah?” She looked at the exit on the far side of the restaurant. He was losing her. He wished he brought the photograph of his mother at the cider mill.

“Well, that’s the way it’s done.” What the hell did that mean?

Lisa narrowed her eyes again and that time he saw his grandmother. She used to hit her grandchildren with a flyswatter when they got into things or made too much of a racket. Lisa looked restless.

George looked around for the server, thinking that if they ordered some food, Lisa would stay. The server was talking to the old women and didn’t see him.

Lisa noticed and said, “It’s because we’re Indian.”

George laughed out loud. He’d heard that before. “That’s what my gram used to say in restaurants. Always picking for a fight, I think. I thought you said you came in here a lot.”

“I do. By myself. I bring another Indian, maybe she gets nervous. One Indian is okay. Two is a tribe, as Sherman Alexie says,” she muttered.

George laughed. He liked this woman, his daughter. All he had to do was convince her. “I think you’re my daughter,” he said.

“Really, how do you know for sure?” Lisa was all business. He wondered if she had done this before. Had she looked for him? Had she looked for Stella? She crossed her arms and looked right into his eyes, a challenge from an Indian if there ever was one. In that gesture, he saw Stella and, again, almost wept.

“I told you,” he said, choking a little, looking for breathing room. “I have a copy of your birth certificate.” It was a lie, in part. He had copies of several birth certificates of other candidates. Any of them could have been his daughter. There was just no way for him to be certain – on paper.

The server came over and asked Lisa if she wanted something to drink to start. Lisa asked for a glass of water and a hot tea. She told the server she was ready to order, too, and asked for a veggie omelet. George took the time to compose himself and ordered a cheeseburger with fries. He wanted them crispy, he said. A high maintenance lawyer.

After the server walked away, they were silent for a time. George wasn’t sure how to talk to his daughter. He knew he couldn’t just blurt out that Lisa looked like his mother, grandmother, and his former lover all in one. It was true, it seemed, but he knew this woman sitting before him wouldn’t be buying that particular brand of bullshit.

Lisa broke the silence. “So what kind of law do you practice?”

George felt relieved by the change in subject. “Indian law.”

“No duh?” Sarcasm and a little impatience. Raised eyebrows.

“Sorry. I do a little lobbying, some employment and labor law for tribal casinos. Tax and gaming compact negotiations. I travel a lot. Sacramento. Omaha. L.A. Phoenix. Minneapolis. I live in D.C. Well, Arlington, actually.”

“Ever been to Grand Forks?”

“Nope. Well, maybe I drove through once on the interstate going east west. It seemed like the state that just never ended.”

Lisa smiled out of the corner of her mouth, underreacting to his little joke. “You from here?”

“Minot,” she said. “I was an Air Force brat.”

George searched his mind. “Never heard of Minot.” None of the North Dakota tribes needed to hire his law firm. He paused and glanced outside. “So you’re used to this weather?” The weather channel had told him it was 26 degrees below zero that morning. With the wind chill, fifty below. Outside, with his nerves working, he had never felt colder in his life.

“Not really.” She had stopped staring at him, but seemed resigned to something, something like failure.

Why couldn’t George think of anything that would convince her?

“What do you remember about your mother?” he asked, hoping to find a hook in there somewhere.

“Not a bit,” she said. But she was interested in what he would have to say next.

George knew this was the make-or-break moment. “She was older than I was, you know. Her name was Stella Pigeon.” He closed his eyes to remember her. “She liked Emily Dickinson. We’d talk about what the poems meant and disagree on everything. She’d come up with some weird theory about how Emily Dickinson was an Indian wrapped in a colonial paradox wrapped in sexual repression wrapped in a white woman. She’d always tell me not to argue with her about Emily Dickinson. Her favorite movie was *Jeremiah Johnson*. Her favorite color was blue. She drove a Honda motorcycle in the summer and she drove fast.” He opened his eyes. Lisa was paying close attention.

“She named you after her grandmother. Emily.”

The name Emily seemed to have no impact, but George suspected that this woman sitting across from him was trying hard not to give anything away. He searched her eyes, looking for something. What did he have to do?

And then Lisa’s mobile rang to the tune of a Patti Smith song. One of the new ones. She apologized and fumbled in her coat for the phone.

George said, “I didn’t know you could buy a Patti Smith ringtone.”

Lisa smiled at him as she found the phone. She turned away and looked outside as she spoke. “Hello?”

There were too many coincidences for George to be wrong. He knew now that this woman was his daughter. The paperwork suggested it, the facts were consistent, and the way this was happening – the smiles, the looks, the gestures, even Patti Smith – it all fit. Or did it? This woman was his last lead, he had to admit. After Lisa, there were no other candidates to hunt down. He was desperate and down to his last out.

“What’s the problem?” Lisa said. “If he won’t eat, then tell him no *Baby Cakes* book when I get home.” Pause. “Ok.” A long pause. “No, put him on. I’ll tell him.”

George stared at the floor, trying to think of what to say next. The server arrived with their meals. George thanked her. He looked back at Lisa to see her staring back at him, still on the phone. He knew she was working on it in her mind, trying to decide whether to take a chance with him, forgive him, trust him, accept him into her own family. There was a part of him that didn’t want her to believe right away, to make him work for it. He wanted the long pursuit before the inevitable moment when she began to believe. Maybe it would take a week.

A month. A year, with several visits? Piles of documentation? Photographs? The objective evidence was there already, but the subjective, the emotional, proof required more. Perhaps shared experiences. Would this moment in the diner be enough? Had they shared enough? Had they shared anything?

“Hi, baby,” she said into the phone, gentler this time. “I love you,” she said. And when she heard a tiny response, she glowed. She looked back at George, holding the phone away from her ear.

George thought, if I were her, would I believe?

Lisa smiled at him for a long, long time before she pointed to her mobile. A hundred years went by. George couldn't remember a time when a look meant so much. He held his breath. After this short, enormous moment, the young woman sitting across from him asked him a simple question.

“So, Dad, do you want to meet your grandson?”

