

Where I'm From Essay

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"Mom, why do I look different from everyone else?" is what I asked for in 2011. I was attending my aunt's wedding as a flower girl, I looked around at all the family I had never seen or met before. Why did I not resemble them? When I asked my mom, she said we were native and came from a rich culture, yet my question still stands. What had to be explained to me as a five-year-old girl was that I took more resemblance to my father, who's Czech. He is pale skinned, blue-eyed, with blonde hair; my mom and her side of the family are tan, brown-eyed, and have brunette hair. As a curious five-year-old does, I begin asking many questions. "We are what?", I say to my mom. She said we were from Hesquiaht. "What's Hesquiaht?" I ask.

Hesquiaht is the indigenous band I am apart of and from; it is one of fourteen bands in our tribe. My tribe is called Nuu-chah-nulth, and it is part of the Kinkashtakumthl Clan. My mom tells me that Hesquiaht is a place and not just a label for where we come from. "So where is it?" I ask. Hesquiaht is located in Hot Springs Cove on the west coast of Vancouver Island; that's where the reserve is. "If the reserve isn't too far away, why have we never gone?" I asked my mom more questions out of desperate curiosity. She tells me she has never taken me there, as you have to be picked up in Tofino by speedboat from one of the uncles on the reserve to be brought there. It is difficult to get to the reserve, and the conditions aren't great either; once you are in Hot Springs Cove, you will want to be equipped with the correct attire. There is no dock for a smaller boat; you better hope you have gumboots on, or you will be very wet getting off the boat and heading to the land. "I remember being in my grandma's house and seeing people around I've never seen before; they weren't from our band." This is when my mom tells me we kind of have neighbours around our reserve; the closest band to ours is Ahousat, and those people she saw from her grandmother's home were members of Ahousat. "At my grandmother's home, we would always eat a variety of seafood. Your uncles all go out on fishing boats and provide food for our band. That's why we always eat so much fish".

My uncles own a fishing boat, and because we are indigenous, we are allowed to fish as much as we want in certain zones, so they provide the whole band with traditional seafood. Usually they bring salmon or halibut, but sometimes we are blessed with upsquee, heishtoop, and quakmiss, which are my personal favourites. The most common foods eaten on the reserve are salmon, cod, halibut, moose, deer, upsquee, heishtoop, quakmiss, and canned smoked salmon. These foods are not only eaten on the reserve, but since it is so far away from the mainland, I don't get to enjoy them as much as my family who live on Vancouver Island do, as they are easier to obtain from our family on the reserve. Salmon, cod, and halibut are caught by my uncles on their big fishing boat; they also harvest quakmiss once a year and trap heishtoop rarely. Quakmiss are herring eggs collected from branches or seaweed; to prepare them, you boil water and dip them in it for about one to two minutes. Heishtoop is escargot and is prepared by being boiled in water and salt. Both quakmiss and heishtoop are only collected at certain times once a year. Most of our traditional food is smoked because it needs to be preserved. For example, salmon is smoked in a smokehouse for taste, or it is sliced into thin pieces and hung in the smokehouse to dry out and make salmon jerky, which we call upsquee. Most foods like upsquee, quakmiss, canned smoked salmon, and smoked salmon are dipped in oil and salt to provide moisture and taste since the majority of our foods are dried for preservation purposes. We also eat deer and moose, which get hunted and made into pepperoni-like sticks, and the skin of the animal is used to make traditional clothing and tools. No part of any hunted animal gets wasted or sold; it is part of our beliefs.

My band believes in the creator; they believe that if you pray to the creator, what is said will come true. "It is similar to manifesting something for yourself or others," is how my mother explained it to me. Seeing eagles is a sign of good luck. Seeing one means that a spirit who has passed is looking out and protecting you. When you are at ceremonies, you will notice that the food prepared is made by the younger members of the family. This is because elders and children come first. When food is served, the elders are served first, then the children, and everyone else, to show respect and because elders and children are seen as the most vulnerable and innocent. I remember being around eight years old and attending a celebration ceremony for my uncle's overcoming cancer. There are ceremonies to celebrate overcoming illness; the person gets cleansed,

and the evil spirit leaves their body that was making them ill. All children must leave the room during this time, as it's believed that the evil spirit will attach itself to a child due to children being innocent and vulnerable. When I attended the ceremony, my cousin and I had to sit outside for what felt like an eternity with two children. "Uncle had to be cleansed, and that's why you two weren't allowed inside; no one wants the spirit to attach to you." Is what my mother told my cousin and me. We didn't understand it then, but I am happy to understand why now. Fish food is probably my favourite tradition. Food fish is when my uncles come to Vancouver to distribute fish to everyone in the family; everyone gets four fish per member of the family with status. "Uncle always gives us more fish than we should have; don't tell your cousin!" is a phrase I hear every year from my mom. You are not allowed to waste any of the fish, and you fillet it yourself at home; all parts of the fish are used and not allowed to be wasted. You are also not allowed to sell the fish you receive; if you do not want it, you must share it. "There are also powwows, which I think you would like," my mom told me, but I didn't know what one was. A powwow is similar to a big dance show; there are multiple different categories of dance, and all the bands in the tribe come together and perform for each other. There are also potlatch gatherings where the entire tribe comes together and brings food and gifts for the other bands; it is essentially a big gift-giving feast. "Be good or the Mummuck will come and get you" is something I heard my whole childhood. The Mummuck steals spirits; you are most vulnerable to the Mummuck when you pass away. When a person passes away, the room must be closed so the mumbo jumbo doesn't come and steal their spirit while their spirit is trying to be set free. Closing the room means the belongings of the person who passed must be removed from the room and cannot be touched by any family members; usually hospital staff remove the items. Only immediate family is allowed in the room while it is closed; all doors and windows get shut and the lights get turned off. A prayer is said, and a traditional blanket is placed on the body. Their eyes get closed. Lastly, the room gets cleansed with white sage to assure the Mummuck that their spirit cannot be stolen as it sets free. The person also gets buried in the exact blanket that was placed on them to protect them for eternity. "Ever since you asked me why you looked different from the rest of the family, I made it my mission that you would grow up knowing who you are". My mom always made an effort to teach me about my background and where I come from. She tells me frequently that each person has a different story behind who they are, no matter how they may appear.

I love who I am and where I come from. I grew up practising my native culture and learning skills like filleting a whole fish and how to preserve it accordingly. I know how to prepare dishes and get to help prepare food for ceremonies. I may not look like the typical indigenous person, but that will never take away my background or what my beloved aunts and uncles went through as children. I am happy I began learning who I was at an early age due to my curiosity, and I will carry it on to my children. Since I live on the mainland, I don't get to experience everything, but my family is here, and my mom does her best to keep my cousins and I learning about our heritage and culture.