

## room 106

*The staff here is not allowed to show any individual style other than low-key jewellery—wedding bands and discreet gold crucifixes. We can't even stand out with, god forbid, a hair ribbon or, say, nylons with a pattern in them. As a result, we are a pretty drab-looking and surly lot, like private school kids or military personnel.*

*To add to the sterile feel, we keep our personal effects in grey metal lockers in the basement. Here there are no orders around style other than cleanliness, and so we take decorative liberties with the storage units. I think that there is something both absurd and touching about grown people with a collection of magnetic mirrors and pictures cut out of magazines.*

*My locker is fairly simple. There is a mirror, a list of important numbers on a large Post-it Note (daycare, school, doctor and mom's cell), a school picture of my son and a black-and-white photograph I found while cleaning one of the rooms. At first I picked it up intending to turn it in at the front desk in case the owner came back for it. Instead it migrated to my locker and it's now become a permanent fixture there.*

*In the eight-by-ten picture there's a little boy in an oversized Toronto Maple Leafs jersey. He's smiling wide, showing three missing teeth on the top of his mouth. His black spiky hair has*

*been both plastered to his forehead with sweat and, in the back, blown up into a halo by the wind. I don't know this kid but I know where he lives. I mean, I don't know the name or exactly where it's located but I can tell by the rocky background and the low scrubby bushes that it's north, way north. The pre-fab building off to the side with the hand-painted sign that reads Canteen and Changing Rooms, means it's on the rez. Of course, the stray dogs wandering into the frame are a pretty good hint too.*

*The jersey is obviously a hand-me-down, probably something he wears every day out of pride and necessity. His left eye has a faint shadow of a bruise forming under it, possibly the result of a wicked check during his last tourney. The stick he holds in his left-hand mitten is decorated with stripes of silver duct tape and black hockey tape. The skates strung together and thrown over his shoulder are old school with curved blades and high ankles. I tell people it's my little cousin Travis when they ask, too embarrassed to admit that he's a stranger who makes me both happy and homesick.*

*I know who took the picture. I saw this photographer wander the lobby, loitering near the brochure rack, observing the other guests like a scientist. Sometimes he would start conversations and a few times he snapped pictures of people while they posed stiffly by the front window, hailed taxis out front or tried to light cigarettes while the wind blew.*

*He left each day with a black canvas backpack, the kind teenagers use in high school to carry their textbooks, cans of pop and little baggies of weed. It was made distinctive by the patches roughly sewn on to it (Canadian flag, Oka flag, Six Nations, Republic of Congo, Union Jack, Australian flag, among others) and by the numerous flight tags still dangling from the top handle. I was a little jealous of the bag, since it was better travelled than I was.*

*This photographer didn't seem like the usual type we got in here: the business travellers, families and single (if even for one night) men. He looked as though he would belong in a hostel in the Parisian countryside or a boutique hotel in the East Village, New York. He didn't seem like the kind of guest we usually got; he seemed more artsy. Still, I guess some people prefer the rooms they stay in to be blank canvases. Some people prefer the hotel to be a clean slate where they can stage intricate productions without distracting details. Maybe he was this minimalist kind of traveller who needed a basic room in order to ignore it in favour of the adventure of the trip itself. Maybe he was just looking for a bed and a bathroom counter clean enough to lay his toothbrush and razor down on. Either way I found myself wondering if he was here to see a girlfriend or whether he had a wife back home.*

*I created his story from the picture of the hockey player and an article I found on the computer about his work and life. His personality I pieced together from both steady observation and intuitive guesswork. I savoured this story when I was by myself, making beds or smoking out the side of the hotel, facing the camera shop across the street. And even if his story is only true for me, I still hope he walks back in some day with his black canvas bag covered in a few new patches.*

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At twelve years old, the Photographer was a precocious boy who smoked cigarettes and dreamed of mist-covered continents far away from his arid home. When he was fourteen, he convinced his second cousin Brenda to go down on him and then spent the next five years trying to work his charms on every unrelated and available girl on his reserve. At nineteen he moved far away to a city whose lights flashed like fish scales in a pool of clear water at the end of a dusty strip of road. There he disappeared like a sock in a dryer.

He worked at a copy shop xeroxing himself into hypnotic states, the work punctuated only by the intermittent smoking of many cigarettes. When he worked here he was not referred to as the Photographer, as he is now. He was simply Copy Boy, which at best put him in the running for being the Photographer's trusty, if slightly underachieving, sidekick. His special skills included the ability to use an expansive vocabulary of various weights of paper, ink compositions and fonts and the ability to direct customers to the precise colour of card or liquid corrector.

He returned to the reserve in summer and on special occasions like funerals and weddings. His first picture-taking gig was thrust upon him through a series of unlikely circumstances that found him Official Photographer at his second cousin Brenda's wedding. She married a local hick everyone referred to simply as Billy, even though his name was Theodore. Billy punched out the original photographer from Select Shots in town after the eager shutterbug took certain "select shots" of his bride-to-be while he was away at the Northwest Truck Driving School.

"Lookin' good Mr. Photographer, *aaaay*," his relatives said, clapping him on the back. A borrowed Nikon F1 Series hung around his neck by a rubbery purple strap while disposable quick snaps nestled in each pocket of his borrowed blue jacket. The equipment made him a camera commando, a veritable celluloid gunslinger. "*Watch out! I'll capture your precious moments, all right, right between the eyes! Fastest lens in all Cree country.*"

His Kokum curled her short hair especially for this day and wore a giant plastic lily pinned to the front of her special occasion SAAN dress. He bent the wiry leaves a bit so they didn't cover her lower face before taking a shot of her with the bride and groom. She smirked at his perfectionism, pointed at his camera and said, "Ever good, you. Look real professional with that fancy machine

there." She had demon red eyes in the finished picture but Kokum hung it up on her warped livingroom wall anyways because her grandson, the Photographer, had taken it.

And this is how he came about his nickname: all because of a wedding where he had spent six consecutive hours watching his family getting progressively drunk and hoping that Billy didn't find out about the whole "head in the laundry room" incident of 2001.

The summer he turned twenty-three, while still financed by his Band to take film and photography courses at college, he became interested in far off continents once more. The Photographer checked out a book from the library that discussed at length the art of tribal markings and traditional customs of Indigenous people from every corner of the globe. He took it home and masturbated over the nudie shots in the "Contemporary Tattooing from Around the World" section, where women of all races and breast sizes took off their clothes and showed huge menacing tigers or softly cross-eyed unicorns slashing and prancing across their backs and thighs.

When the book was overdue and an annoyed librarian called, he fished it out from under his bed and spent a bored Sunday afternoon flipping through it. He sat up against the headboard and lit a cigarette.

He opened it on a section called "Mark of Civilization" and read: *"The Baule people of the African Ivory Coast have been researched and documented through numerous anthropological studies over the years due to their fascinating customs and traditions around scarification."* He thought, "Jesus, and I imagined I was a badass for getting my ear pierced." He continued reading.

*"Up into 1930, Baule women were known for their extensive and dedicated markings that could extend across entire torsos. Today, it is generally only the older women who still bear the markings of this practice."*

Pictures of Baule Elders with tubular breasts and serious but beautiful faces stared out at him with black-and-white intensity. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of these photos was the scarifications themselves: simple cuts that ornamented smooth and wrinkled skin alike.

*"Scars known as Nzima usually took the form of a cross and, on the opposite cheek, two horizontal lines. Baule also marked their children to dissuade death from taking them, especially after the deaths of several other babies born to the same mother. The practice was often a fine line between what was considered to increase value and beauty and what was considered to decrease it and make the person less desirable to unseen forces. All in all, the entire custom required strong belief in the values of the community and its distinct identity."*

And so it was then—quite by accident—as he was smoking a cigarette in his unmade bed and reading a late library book that the Photographer stumbled into the biggest question of his young life.

Shit, marking your face took some serious guts, like the refugee Burmese ladies who stretched out their necks with brass coils and survived by selling self-portraits to Thai tourists. He couldn't even commit to a tattoo somewhere in the shirt-wearing region, or even on his ass. How could these women make such a long-term commitment? He reread the passage.

*"All in all, the entire custom required strong belief in the values of the community and its distinct identity."* What the hell was a community's distinct identity? Certainly each group of people had their own unique qualities and peculiarities that made them different from each other, like snowflakes or Cabbage Patch Kids. But was identity based on the quality of one group different from another's? He wished he had cable TV so he could seek out the answer to his esoteric question. He believed cable with its easily digestible educational channels held the answers to all his esoteric questions.

Cable was for him an electronic Holy Grail, a divine resource cathedral open 24-7. Unfortunately, the landlord had disassembled his pirated system some months before.

The Photographer didn't enjoy sitting and grappling with life's tough questions in his small, clammy basement apartment while the lady upstairs "Sweated to the Oldies" directly above his head. But he couldn't stop. He figured that perhaps the Baule were one of the few who understood what identity meant. I mean, shit, they carved it into them, didn't they? They stayed in a back corner of his head over the months and years to come.

After he was finished with photography school, he framed up his bachelor of Fine Arts degree and mailed it back to his Kokum for her crooked old wall of fame. He decided it was time to make a trek to the Ivory Coast.

Having made his decision to leave the continent much in the same manner he would arbitrarily decide to run out for a Snickers bar at three in the morning, the Photographer was surprisingly well prepared. His uncle, who had made some good coin by both investing in the stock market and by marrying an old lady from one of those oil-rich reserves, had kitted him out upon graduation. He received a Canon EOS 1D Mark II and a telephoto lens with all the sweet toys to go with it. He also managed to inadvertently schedule a check up with his doctor two weeks before departing and had casually mentioned his trip, so he was promptly rewarded with shots for hepatitis A, yellow fever, hepatitis B, tetanus, pertussis and influenza.

With a contact in the Baule community secured via email through an international photographers' association, a Lonely Planets Travel Guide to the Ivory Coast and a loose idea that perhaps an epiphany, if not death by mosquito, was waiting for him out there, the Photographer boarded a plane.

At the airport on the other side of the world he thought the humidity that choked the air from his lungs was exhaust from the planes. Going through customs it was his passport and not his status card that showed his identity. He never felt more Canadian than he did in Africa. He hired a cab and drove into town. As he stood outside the car and peeled off unfamiliar bills to pay the driver, he realized that the stifling air was not the waste from the huge engines, but the early morning African heat that would only get worse as the sun continued to rise.

That afternoon he hooked up with his guide, a short fellow named Kweku, who wore a vintage Montreal Canadiens jersey, even with the extreme temperatures. After some strong coffee, he took the Photographer to a Baule marketplace. The caffeine sped up Kweku's already rapid-fire, Baule- and French-accented English. He was hard to understand. The open-air market was set up in a square surrounded by crumbling buildings, and beyond that, dry, open fields. It was hectic with its makeshift stalls, bins of maize and yams, metal crafts and over-priced masks marketed to tourists searching for genuine Baule artifacts.

The market was operated by women with smooth foreheads and braided hair. They competed for customers, shouting out prices and waving their long arms over open baskets of goods. Kweku chatted and flirted with the merchants, asking several if the Photographer could take their picture. Most of them consented, but a few shied away, covering their faces with calloused hands or silky scarves. Several bore the scars that lured the Canadian across the ocean to begin with. They were older women with serious eyes and strong voices. They allowed him to take their picture without giggling or slouching away with unease and modesty.

Kweku was turning out to be a great companion. He spent hours talking about his huge family and laughing at his own jokes. He shared the more serious stories of his community's history as the

two men sat down to lunch at a café half way down a narrow side street. He spoke of Queen Aura Poku, who led the people from Ghana to this settlement three hundred years previous. "This is how the people received their name. She had to sacrifice a son to get over the river. Bauh means 'the son is dead.'" He chewed his chicken thoughtfully. "We are named for the tragedy that brought about our survival. How can we not continue to live here in our ways? How's that for a mother's guilt trip! She teaches us, boy." He laughed from his belly and shook his round head.

Kweku's stories reminded the Photographer of the old people back home and how they spoke of events as if they were both a million years ago and just yesterday, relying on the cycles they witnessed all around instead of calendars or dates.

The Photographer spent three months with Kweku, his wife Catherine and their five children in a village cluster. Catherine did not speak English but communicated with him through an elementary sign language when Kweku wasn't around. She was constantly moving, the hibiscus flowers printed on her skirts blurry in her motion. She bathed the children, cooked the food, cleaned the house, washed the clothes and readied bundles of her yams for the marketplace every fourth day. Catherine carved out the heavy-breasted, strong-calved wooden statues Baule women were famous for. She smiled at her husband when he came home from work and gently chastised him if he and the Photographer stumbled in too late smelling of beer and grease. She and her friends, with their colourful, whirling skirts and plaited hair (the ones who carried baskets of fruits and handicrafts, who laughed easily as if there wasn't always more work than time) kept the cycles of this place in motion.

After a while, the Photographer missed his Kokum and all his cousins—even the ones who mooched too much. The homesickness really set in after Kweku brought him to an old woman's house. He introduced

her as his Great Aunt Hughena, a name she had been given by an eccentric Scottish explorer she cooked for sixty years ago. She had an older tribal name, Awotwi, the eighth girl born to her parents and the first one to survive infancy. No one used Awotwi anymore. Hughena's house was a spotless one-room affair with a solid wooden table surrounded by benches. Her kitchen counter was a discarded wooden door propped up by trestles with a wash bin cut into the end. She had an old gas stove against the back wall and a hideously flowered couch against the other. Behind the couch on the cement wall was a mosaic of photos, some in plastic frames and others taped up alone, their edges curling and surfaces yellowing.

After they had shared a cup of tea and talked a bit, the Photographer walked over to the couch and leaned in to examine the African woman's own wall of fame. Hughena shuffled over to stand beside him as he looked at each photo carefully.

She pointed one gnarled finger to a framed photo of a young boy with shiny dark skin and two missing front teeth. She spoke in musical tones; Kweku, who sat on the couch sipping his tea out of a thick ceramic mug, translated. He was doing a half-ssed job, too interested in listening to the soccer match on Hughena's old transistor radio. It took him a moment to regain composure after the Cameroon team scored. "That is the youngest of her great grandchildren," he managed, wiping at the tea he had spilled down the front of his shirt in his excitement. "He goes to kindergarten in the next community over."

The old woman smiled up into the Photographer's face in the pause while he waited for Kweku's translation. She continued on only after he understood what she was saying and nodded his interest. She straightened the curled edge of an old black-and-white photo and explained that it was a picture of her husband, a tall thin man with handsome features and strong arms. It was taken before he

left to work in the mines many decades ago. He stood with two other men, all three of them dressed in long pants and short-sleeve button-up shirts. They smiled broadly and hung arms around each other's shoulders. Here Kweku piped up, "They were driven to the mines by hunger. Many men went. Many did not return: my father, my uncles, Catherine's grandfather. Everyone lost a cousin or a brother. He," he said, pointing to Hughena's handsome husband, "did return. But the lung sickness took him later."

Hughena pointed to a row of tiny unframed prints, all of them showing different chubby babies, some bald and sleeping, others screaming and dressed in frilly white lace bonnets and dresses. She explained that there were many more babies that had been born to her family but that not all of them had pictures taken. She spent a half hour describing the ones who didn't make it to the wall, trying to include each one who couldn't afford to hang here with the others.

Later, the Photographer gathered together as many of her family members as he could locate with Kweku's help and took a group shot that would hang in the centre of this wall. It would sit behind glass in a gilded frame that he would specifically buy for Hughena.

The days went on, and he became comfortable enough to wander about the households of Kweku's friends taking photos. The Baule children teased him. He knew this even though he didn't understand their words. They reminded him of his own nieces and nephews, the way they ran about his feet, tumbling over each other like puppies in the long grass. At night, which came fast and furious in this equatorial climate, he lay on his mat dreaming of his arid home far from this mist-covered continent.

The Photographer returned to his city, landing at four in the morning. He emptied his little apartment before he'd left and he had handed the keys back to the landlord, so he wasn't really

in much of a hurry to go anywhere. The sale of his school books, his first Olympus camera and the stereo his uncle had sent him for his birthday had paid for the plane fare to Africa, so there wasn't much left of his possessions. He locked his camera bags in an airport locker and settled into Terminal 3 on a hard-backed plastic chair for a rough night's sleep.

The Photographer spent the following day taking public transit into the city where he dropped off his pictures with a buddy, who offered to show them to his agent. Then he hopped a Greyhound, barrelling toward his Kokum's cosy house. He shook off the dust of the Motherland onto her welcome mat and slept for two days, only waking to eat four bowls of moose stew and five pieces of greasy, warm fry bread.

On the third day, the Photographer was awakened before noon by the bang of the squeaky screen door. In walked a short man with a confident gait who went directly to the fridge and removed a piece of last night's bread. The toothy grin under the wide brim of his fluorescent orange camouflage hat was all that he needed to see to know which one of his many cousins this one was. "Hey Gary," he yawned, scratching at the little lines of precise, raised scars under his heart.

Sleepy eyed, he folded the heavy star blanket Kokum insisted he sleep with when he showed up shivering in the newly shocking North American chill that first night ("*Eh, only the best for my boy the Photographer, surviving the jungle and everything. Holeee.*") Gary sat on the brown corduroy rocking chair in the corner, lit up a smoke and offered him one. "Heard you went to Africa or something," he muttered while lighting a du Maurier cigarette.

"Yup," the Photographer answered, jumping to be second man on the match. "What's been going on around here?"

"Here," Gary lifted the brim of his hat with his thumb. "Heh, nothing. Nothin' at all. Oh, Billy got himself locked up. He threatened that little guy from the photo store in town after Brenda turned up expecting, aaaaay." He laughed a bit here and took a long drag. "Billy was at that truck school so can't be his. Anyways, he went to the store in the middle of the day with his rifle."

"Ho wah," marvelled the Photographer, still hoping the head story stayed buried in with the pile of his auntie's dirty clothes. His cousin slowly unravelled the tales of the rez over the next hour while they buttered old bread and made mugs of strong tea. It was early, but Kokum was already at church getting ready for the fair they were holding there that afternoon. She was in charge of the crafts table and would preside over the Holy 50/50.

"Hey, you know, if you're gonna be staying home, you should go talk to Brenda's photo guy," Gary spat out between big bites of the chewy bread. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and threw a small bag of weed at his cousin.

"Why?" the Photographer asked. He went to the sink to rinse out their mugs and search for Kokum's rollies.

"Maybe he can get you a job and all. You're a picture taker. Maybe you can, I dunno, like, be his helper or something." He was immensely proud of this suggestion and even offered to drive him into town after the church fair so he could talk to the photographer from Select Shots.

"No, that's okay though. My agent called and I've got to be back in Toronto for Thursday. Some magazine liked my pictures and they want to meet with me." Now that he had said it out loud, he was actually a little bit pleased with himself. He had been unmoved when Kara had called yesterday from her office and told

him about the magazine and a big sponsorship offer based on his photo essay of the Baule. She spoke to him as if he were a little boy with ADD, but at least she did her job.

His inability to match Kara's excitement came from doubt. The Photographer was plagued by doubt, the kind that creeps in and puts your pride in a headlock at times when you should be otherwise overjoyed. It's that doubt that makes you take a close look at your sweet little newborn looking back up at you in its little woollen cap with your own eyes in the delivery room and ask, "Is it mine?" It's the kind of doubt that makes you shrug at a framed BA degree and say, "Well, it isn't a Masters, but it might look okay on the wall."

His doubt grew from the same place that his passion for the trip had. It was the questioning place that still tied him in knots. He had not found the answers he needed to understand his own identity. In fact, while the Baule had been solid in the demonstration of community and a strong sense of belief and unity, they could not explain it to him. Even if they had tried, Kweku's interpretation skills were dubious at best. They were confident enough with this abstract concept to carve the symbols that were born of it into their flesh. It was a paradox of communally covering the body in order to uncover the individual.

"Oh, okay," Gary shrugged. "Hey, we better get over to the church before we miss the first round of bingo then."

The Photographer packed the joint they would share on their way to the church hall to make the afternoon more tolerable and grabbed his warm parka from the back of the kitchen chair. "S'go then."

"S'go then," his younger cousin echoed before he turned at the door. "Hey Photographer man, what the heck d'you go all the

Biting off the tip of the joint and spitting it into the garbage pail, he thought for a second before replying, "So I could try to figure out why I keep coming back to this ole rez."

"Oh," Gary answered, "but that one's easy. I thought it was for Brenda's special talents in the laundry room, aaaayy!!" Then he quickly dodged the fist that came at him. The two tussled with each other and fell out the squeaky screen door, set Kokum's husky barking like mad and rolled off the front porch in a heap of hysterical laughter.

By the time the Photographer was twenty-nine he had become what was known as "internationally acclaimed" for his work. The critics said: *'The synaptic tension present in his sharp-edged subjects can only be matched by the ease in which he captures them. Truly a genius, the Photographer continues to wow the art world with his all-consuming passion.'*

He could now travel with ease, not having to sell stereos and used books to scratch up cash. He had a semi-detached townhouse in the city, bought himself a shiny black pickup and shared a studio with three other photographers who shot brittle models and varnished fruit for fashion and food magazines respectively. He fixed his Kokum's walls, and she was sporting a pretty fancy new pair of Sorel boots. She was almost as pleased with the waterproof, fur-trimmed, clompy boots as she was with her grandson. ("My boy, the Photographer, has all his pictures in those magazines Dr. Napew has in his office there.") But one of the best perks he had found so far was that—with a house, a truck and a job that sent him all over the world and paid the bills—he didn't really have any problems getting women to go into the laundry room with him.

One day, after a few summers of borrowed complacency, the Photographer packed up his bags and drove his new truck to the rez. He buckled on Kokum's squishy old couch under a heavy

sewn Star blanket for a few days and then set off to scratch the community itch that still followed him. He began with Gary's house where he took pictures of his cousin with his gap-toothed wife and their twin boys. Gary still had on that same orange camouflage hat and showed every tooth in his mouth with his exaggerated grins. His wife had expanded so much in the three years since they had gotten hitched that her voluminous behind now covered well over half the space in the front seat of their truck. But the look on Gary's face when he had his arm thrown around the rolls of her shoulders cast no doubt on his devotion, nor did the look of awe in his eyes in the next frame where she held him clean off the ground in a monstrous bear hug.

The Photographer made his way around the rez and, after snapping a few pictures of Kokum while she made bread and protested loudly that she "didn't have her best handkerchief on," he headed out to the neighbouring community. He really had only meant to snap pictures of the Cree people whose territories rambled over these craggy northern lands, but when he was done with that, he shipped the rolls of film back to the studio, sent for more supplies and headed off into the East to visit his third cousin who had married a Mi'kmaq girl and had moved to Indian Brook First Nation. From there he made his way north.

In one fly-in community it seemed the entire reserve came out to meet the newcomer and have their picture taken. He saw old grannies paired up with their chubby great-grandchildren who asked him shyly to take photos for their own crooked walls of fame. He visited the men who worked the traplines untouched by time or cable TV. He snapped away as children played ice hockey, teased each other mercilessly and tumbled over snowbanks and down dirt roads on their way home for dinner.

One icy night, after one of the games was called off when the single spotlight that hovered above the rink burnt out, the Photographer



stopped a boy to talk. His two front teeth were missing. The kid looked like his mom had used a bowl to trim his mop of hair, but his cheeks were rosy and already his eyes were etched with deep lines of laughter. "Hey, kid," he said, each word a puff of smoke in the freezing air, "what's so great about this little rez?"

The kid tilted his head a bit and looked at him through squinted eyes. "I mean," he tried again, "what makes this place a home?"

The Photographer spent a few minutes trying to ply the kid for answers while watching him flick bits of snow up into the air with the end of his stick. Finally, when he asked, "How do you know you belong here?" the kid smiled and ripped off one mitten that was covered with little pills of ice. He dug deep into the back pocket of his faded rugby pants and pulled out an Indian Status Card. He flashed it like a badge and smiled, showing off crooked new teeth pushing through his gums. He turned around to wave as he took off up the road to catch his brothers on their way home to warm bowls of hamburger soup.

That night, the Photographer spent time with a schoolteacher who had stolen his heart. "It's more than a card or a number," she remarked, stretching out across the crochet covers of her bed. "It's about traditions and strength. It's about the fact that we are tied to these lands and the fact that these particular lands don't exist anywhere else in the world. That makes us unique."

"Yeh." He was smoking a cigarette, sitting naked on the couch at the end of the bed. "I suppose."

She smiled slyly and pulled herself to the edge of the bed. She slid her long, long legs open and whispered seductively, "Take a picture of this, baby. It's where it all begins and ends." The Photographer reached to the floor beside him and picked up his

camera which the teacher had forgotten was even in the room. He snapped off a couple of frames before she screamed and ran to the bathroom giggling.

Now, here in this room by himself, he looked at her photo, the one of her naked back running toward the bathroom, long hair whipping around as she laughed over her shoulder. Her laughter was part of it. Part of the answer and one of the reasons he would be going back up there as soon as he was done this weekend, to see if maybe she would consider following him back to his townhouse in the city as his partner.

He checked into one of those chain motels usually found perched outside urban airports like beige gargoyles. He was here for the big pow wow like every other Indian he had come across in the last day and a half. He had already taken pictures at the blues concert last night, stills of laughing friends and smoky faces lingering at the bar. He planned on giving half of his work here this weekend to a couple of Native news agencies—friends he did favours for sometimes.

He paced around the room, straightening chairs and looking out the window at the darkened street. Cabs slid in and out of the front driveway emptying out revellers and picking up hurried travellers with their briefcases and backpacks. He sat in one of the stiff backed chairs and sighed deeply.

In Africa, he had thought of his Kokum as he sat with the grannies there who still carried the scars of their ancestral history. She carried the language, the superstitions, the humour and the history of her own ancestral people on broad shoulders. Even in Africa, amongst the anteaters, the gnats, the scrub brush and the heat, with the Baule and the crocodiles and the lush coast, he could taste Kokum's bread and hear her stories.

*"One winter us kids snuck out after the old lady went to bed," she spoke as she and her grandson sat near the wood stove with chipped mugs of strong tea. "It was real late and we were itchin' to get out 'cause we weren't allowed out that day. Dunno why, maybe we were bad or something. Anyways, we went up to the top of the hill and everything looked real pretty in the moonlight. It snowed that day and us, we were just excited as heck to play in it. So we piled onto the ole toboggan and down we went. Just before we decided to get in before the ole lady woke up, Percy decides he's going down by himself. Well, didn't he slam into a pine half way down." Right about here she made a loud smacking noise by slapping her leg with her palm.*

*"So we all run down cause he's not moving. We can see his mittens lying in the snow a few feet from his head and the toboggan's broke, but he ain't moving. We drag him home and by now it's close to dawn. We know she'll be up to get the fire up in the stove so we hide our wet clothes near the back door and put our PJs back on. Percy is still out like a light so we dress him in his PJs and sit him at the table. Little Freddy uses his scarf to tie him to the chair and we stick a toque on him to cover the blood that's all in his hair there." By now the Photographer is giggling at her and her grandmother's outlaw behaviour and a bit horrified at her and her sibling's willingness to sacrifice their little brother so they wouldn't get in trouble from their mom.*

*"She comes in to fix that fire and we're just being as quiet as can be. She looks around the table, sees Percy slumping there over his bowl and keeps getting things ready. We're kicking each other under the table and watching her, waiting for the wrath of god to come for us. But she just lets us sit there, sweating over our mush, waiting for punishment. When she goes into the outhouse, we all put on our wet clothes and make a run for it to school. Every one of us catches sick that week." She stubbed out her rolled cigarette and took a few sips of tea before her grandson finally blurted out, "Well, what happened to Percy?"*

*"Oh, Percy," she said. "He was just fine. The old lady saw everything from the back window. We were screaming so much, she woke up. She just cleaned him up and put him in bed. My auntie came over later to check on him, cause she knew about these things. He had an egg on the back of his head and busted his rib but he was just fine. And we all felt so guilty we took turns takin' care of him. But we lost our toboggan and we never went out in the night again." She got up to start the dishes, signifying the end of the storytelling for the night.*

The Photographer jumped up suddenly in this boxy room as something began to reveal itself in his slippery, eager mind. He threw one metal suitcase on the bed and snapped it open. He emptied envelope after envelope of black-and-white copies onto the slick, flowered bedspread. They slid off of each other's glossy surfaces and onto the floor. He was consumed by a fever that made him sweat and mutter under his breath as he tacked up photos onto the greying walls with bits of double-sided tape. When he was done, there was only one missing. He set about turning on lamps and setting tripods and timers.

Sitting now on the chair, surrounded by the portraits of his people, the Photographer took his own picture. The final result was stunning as it hung in galleries around the globe along with the entire work titled "Finding Home." It showed a skinny Cree man with a boyish grin and a bit of a mullet. He was slouched low in an uncomfortable chair, leg crossed over knee in a pair of jeans and a short-sleeve button-down shirt. His wire-framed glasses were a bit crooked and his smile was huge and full. Around him were the photos he had taken along his journey through Indian country.

Here was an old woman, head covered by a faded flowered scarf. She was wearing three sweaters, one on top of the other. Her fingers were wound together nervously and placed on her lap, holding a cheap plastic rosary, while on her wrists were the faint scars from

Here was a young boy, maybe two years old. His belly sat like a little brown pot on the waistband of his shorts. He was standing in a playground in the middle of a field with no grass, eating a popsicle and staring intently into the camera.

Here was a picture of Kokum in her SAAN dress and her new Sorel boots, standing next to her wall of fame, where in the middle sat the degree of her grandson whom she had raised from birth. He was the first one to finish high school and go to university. Her face was glowing and her toothless old smile was magnificent. Around her in the background were the MVPs in her life who had made it to this prestigious wall. There was Brenda in her cream-coloured wedding dress and a handful of fake roses; there were Gary and his wife holding hands and smiling like crazy for the camera. There was a sprinkling of blue first-place ribbons and even more red seconds and thirds from track-and-field events and random baseball tournaments, a few hand-drawn cartoons sent by a granddaughter and aspiring artist, a couple of certificates from community colleges and a half-dozen birth announcements. On the far side of the wall, where the newer items were displayed, there were a few newspaper articles about her Photographer grandson, framed up and hanging beside a couple of his photos.

He carries each of these people with him. They are not pieces of a separate whole; they are each in and of themselves perfect, and they are all connected and inside of one another like a set of cedar babushka dolls.

The Photographer is filled with the urge to run out and mark himself so that everyone can see his true identity, to whom and what he belongs. Instead, he swings down to the pow wow and picks himself up some fry bread.

## room 207

*"Naomi needs a man." It was stated as fact, not opinion, and my mother told anyone who would listen. In fact, she spent most of her time trying to find this elusive man: at the mall, while grocery shopping, while visiting friends, at church, even at her gynecologist's office. It was more of a job for her than working at the Bingo Hall canteen selling double-double coffees and bags of chips. Someone should have been paying her. Certainly not me, since I didn't approve of the endeavour. I did not need a man, no matter how much my mother insisted.*

*I had men in the past. I even had a child with one of them: a boy I prayed would be nothing like his father. The prospect was likely since the two had never met outside of the hospital that first day. Men complicated things, and besides sex I couldn't see a good use for them. I wasn't ready to declare lifelong celibacy or to even rule out the occasional fantasy in which I was happily married and in love, but I was also a realist. The men I interacted with on a daily basis reminded me of how rare it is to find a good one.*

*My apartment is small, a one-bedroom down by the beach. I live with my son, our cat and at last count four mice that have carved out their home in the wainscoting of the front hall. We've named them Marsba, Jan, Cindy and Carol and the cat, a spotted black-and-white fat ass named Stripes, could care less about them. They subsist on a steady diet of toast crumbs and cat chow and are so*